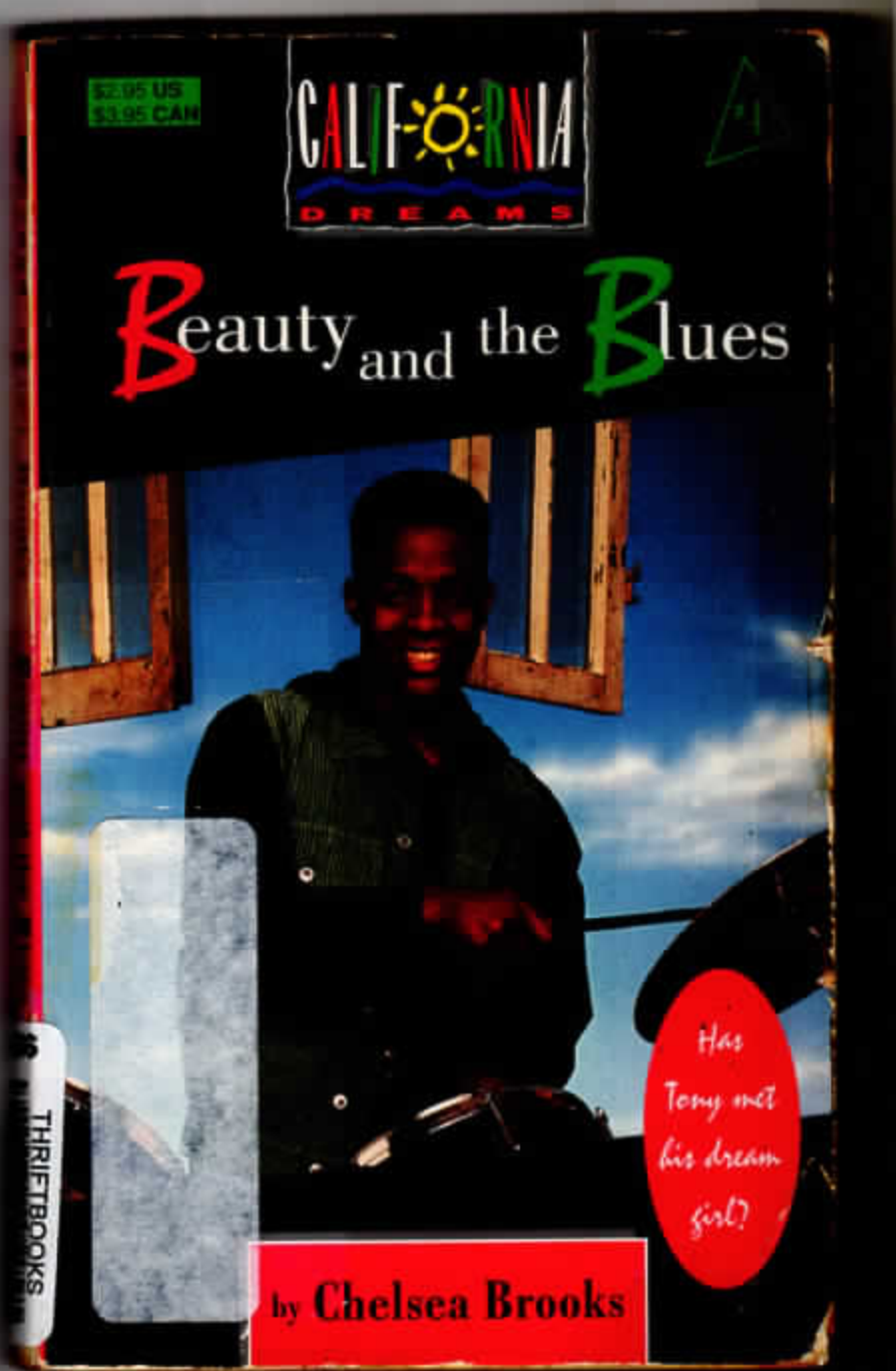
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CALIFORNIA
DREAMS
Beauty and the Blues
Has Tony met his dream girl?
by Chelsea Brooks
THRIFTBOOKS

Chapter 1

"Let me tell you something, man to man," Tony Wicks said, wiping crumbs off the red counter of Sharkey's beachside restaurant. "You can go to Paris, France, or stay right here in Redondo Beach, California, but still a good woman is hard to find." Tony's dark brown eyes flickered wisely as he nodded across the counter to his friends, Matt Garrison and Sylvester "Sly" Winkle.

"And even if you do find one, you'll never be able to understand her," Matt agreed. He ran a hand through his short, light brown hair and took another sip of his soda.

"Aw, come on, you guys! Women are a piece of cake!" Sly argued, setting down his chocolate milk shake and scanning the crowd of swimsuited teens in

the restaurant. Many, including Tony, Matt, and Sly, were students at Pacific Coast High.

"There must be a dozen fine young ladies right here in this restaurant," he continued. "They're probably working up the courage to walk over and say hello to us right now." Sly flashed a wide smile at a girl passing by wearing a lime green swimsuit. She ignored him completely as she joined her friends at one of the blue-and-yellow tables.

"Working up her courage? I don't think so, Sly," Matt said, shaking his head.

Tony put his palms down and leaned across the counter. "Maybe the problem is you, Sylvester. Why don't you take a long walk on the beach—count the grains of sand or something. Me and Matt'll catch you later."

"Without me around, you might as well forget the whole thing," Sly replied, his brown eyes gleaming. "My animal attraction is all you two turkeys have going for you. Didn't you ever notice the cleft in my chin? It turns females on like crazy."

"Sly, didn't anyone ever tell you that there's more to life than girls?" Matt said, smiling. "And there's more to girls than their bodies?"

Sly and Tony shot each other worried glances. "Matt's still heartbroken over Randi Jo," Sly guessed. "That's the only explanation for these bizarre remarks."

"Cheer up, brother," Tony chimed in, slapping

Matt on the shoulder. "Pretty soon Randi Jo will seem like ancient history. Just think of all the other sweet young things who can't wait to get their chance to go out with guys like us."

Tony ran a hand through his short, curly black hair and quickly checked himself out in the mirror behind the counter. Yes, he congratulated himself. He was still a perfect ten. Clear, chocolate brown skin, well-muscled arms and chest, eyes of destruction. Any self-respecting woman would find him totally irresistible, he told himself, even though he was wearing a turquoise Sharkey's T-shirt that identified him as a lowly employee of the place.

"You dudes want a refill on those drinks?" he asked Sly and Matt. They waved him off, and Tony took the empty glasses and put them in a tub with other dirty dishes. Maybe his job was the reason the ladies weren't breaking down his door lately. Maybe it was because he had to work after school and didn't have a lot of money or a hot new car.

The truth was, Tony didn't have a whole lot of time for dating, although he gladly made time whenever he could. Between homework, and Sharkey's, and all the hours he practiced on drums with California Dreams, the hottest band at Pacific Coast High, Tony was a busy guy.

Matt was in the band, too, along with his sister, Jenny, who sang and played the keyboards. Matt not only played lead guitar and sang, he was also the

Dreams' main songwriter. The fourth member of the band was the ever-cheerful, long-haired blonde, Tiffani Smith, their bass player. And then, of course, there was Sly. Sylvester Winkle was the Dreams' manager—although so far he had only managed to get them a few nonpaying gigs and a demo tape. Still Sly was so confident that he could get them their big break that all the band members stuck with him. Of course, he was their friend, too, despite his occasional—make that frequent—obnoxiousness.

Sly turned back around now, a huge smile on his face. "Did you see that blonde by the door? Don't wake me if I'm dreaming."

"Cool your jets, will you?" Matt said with a sad look in his brown eyes. "It gets a little tired, guys."

Sly looked Matt up and down, then turned to Tony. "Without Randi Jo, it looks like our buddy Matt has checked into the Heartbreak Hotel."

"Cut it out!" Matt said, sounding really annoyed. "Randi Jo and I are still friends, and that's just fine with me."

No sooner had he said the words than the front door opened and in walked Randi Jo herself. She was wearing beach shorts and a cutoff pink T-shirt. Her long blonde hair streamed behind her. On her left, with his hand on her shoulder, stood a tall, handsome guy with dark hair and aviator shades. Tony, Matt, and Sly watched as the two of them sat down at a table near a window.

"Like I said, she's free to see anyone she wants, and so am I," Matt said with a sigh. "It's fine with me. Really it is."

"Sure, Matt," Sly said dryly. "And I'm Elvis come back to life."

"Hey, it may not be what it seems," Tony said to Matt, trying to be hopeful. "Maybe she and that dude are just friends, you know?"

"Yeah, right," Matt mumbled, looking down at the counter.

Tony leaned over and whispered into Matt's ear. "Tony Wicks's Rule of Romance Number Thirty-seven: You're never sure of anything until you've got an eyewitness. Or, in this case," he added as he sidled out from behind the counter, "an ear-witness."

Before Matt could object, Tony turned away, whistling one of his favorite California Dreams tunes, and headed over toward Randi Jo's table. She and the guy were smiling into one another's eyes, and it sure seemed to Tony like they were an item.

"Our deepest feelings are what we're all about," the guy was saying to Randi Jo. "It's so important to share them, but naturally we need to feel safe when we do."

"Oh, I totally agree," Randi Jo replied. Tony bent down to pick up the gum wrapper he'd just thrown to the floor on purpose.

"Love can be painful and confusing," the guy continued. "But what else is life all about?"

"I know exactly what you mean," Randi Jo agreed.

How am I going to break this to my main man Matt? Tony asked himself. It wasn't going to be easy, that was for sure.

"Tony! Hi!" Randi Jo's surprised voice came from over his shoulder as he knelt on the floor, listening. "What are you doing down there?"

"Oh, I, uh, you know how Sharkey likes the place real tidy," Tony explained, sounding lame even to himself. "Well, I'd better get back to the counter. Nice to see you, Randi Jo. Nice to meet you, too, er . . ."

"Bill," said the guy, shaking Tony's hand. "Take care."

Tony marched back behind the counter, repeating the name *Bill* under his breath.

"Well?" Sly asked as soon as Tony was close enough. "Are they in love or aren't they?"

Tony gave Sly a dirty look. Didn't he realize that Matt was sitting right there? "I, uh, well . . . his name is Bill." Tony forced a smile onto his face. The smile was not contagious. Matt still looked like his favorite pet had just died.

"*A* for effort, guys, but you don't have to try to cheer me up," he said. "I'll get over her one of these days." With that, he got up and walked out of Sharkey's, taking a last, mournful look at Randi Jo, who never even noticed him.

"Whoa!" Sly breathed when Matt had disappeared. "That poor dude is molto depresso. Thank goodness it isn't me."

"I'm never going to let a woman get to *me* like that," Tony said, shaking his head in dismay.

Just as the words came out of his mouth, the door opened, and a willowy girl with shoulder-length red hair, porcelain skin, and devastatingly huge, light blue eyes walked in. She sauntered all the way across the restaurant and took a seat at the far corner table. It was only then that Tony realized he'd stopped breathing.

"Mama mia," Sly said under his breath. "Do you see what I see?"

"Don't get any ideas, Sly," Tony whispered back. "That one is mine."

"Excuse me, do I know you? Let a pro handle this, will you?" Sly shot back. "Just stand back and watch me go."

Tony put his hand down firmly on Sly's shoulder. "Brother, that young lady doesn't know it yet, but she's about to fall head over heels in love with a way cool dude by the name of Tony Wicks."

Before Sly could react, Tony grabbed a menu and whizzed over to her table. Just as he got there, he ran into Heather, the girl who was on table duty that day. "Switch with me for ten minutes," Tony begged her in a low voice. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

"All right," Heather said, nodding. "But why do you want to—?"

"I'll tell you later," Tony said quickly, taking her by the shoulders and spinning her toward the counter. Sly had sat back down with a dazed look on his face as he watched Tony go to work.

"Hello, there, young lady, may I offer you a menu? My name is Tony, and I'll be your waiter today. If there's anything I can get you—and I do mean *anything*. . . ."

The girl giggled softly, flashing a smile that melted Tony's insides.

"Uh, maybe I can help you sort out the menu," he offered. He took it from her gently and opened it. "The burgers and fries are particularly good today, and may I recommend the double-thick milk shakes?"

"Sounds excellent," the girl said in a silky voice that nearly made Tony gasp. The whole time, her beautiful blue eyes were glued to his. "I'll take one of each."

"Uh, um, sure thing . . . I'm down . . . I'll be right back, er . . ."

"Victoria," she said, offering her hand. "Victoria Wellington." Tony took her hand and had to stop himself from kissing it right there in Sharkey's. Instead he shook it. A bolt of electricity seemed to jump from her fingers and zip right through his body.

"I've never seen you in here before," Tony said

as he got ready to go and place the order. "I'm sure, because I would have remembered."

Victoria's smile grew wider as Tony beamed back at her. "I've never been in here before. I guess I've always thought of Sharkey's as a Pacific Coast High hangout. I go to Ashford Academy—it's a private school, and—"

"Wicks!" Tony winced as Sharkey called him from the kitchen door. "Are you gonna work today, or are you gonna socialize?"

"Excuse me," Tony apologized to Victoria as smoothly as he could manage. "I'll be right back." Walking away, he punched his fist in the air and whispered, "Yes!" before going into the kitchen to place Victoria's order. Sharkey was behind the grill, all two hundred forty pounds of him, wearing a frown on his chubby face.

"Sorry, boss," Tony said. "I was helping the young lady figure out the menu."

"Sure you were," Sharkey said, nodding dubiously. "Hey, I understand, Wicks. I was young once, too. But not while I'm payin' you to work, okay?"

"Sure, Sharkey," Tony said, hardly even paying attention.

She liked him, he was sure of it! That grin had a message behind it, and the message was: "I'm crazy about you, Tony Wicks, you incredible hunk, you."

Tony could just see the two of them now, walking down the beach hand in hand, the sun setting, the

surf rolling. As the last rays of daylight disappear, he folds Victoria into his strong arms while she lifts her luscious lips so he can plant a big, wet one....

"Wake up, Wicks! Here's your order!" Sharkey's voice startled Tony out of his reverie.

"Thanks! That was fast!"

"It's been eight minutes, pal. Where've you been?"

Not bothering to answer, Tony grabbed the tray and headed out of the kitchen. He paused to check his reflection in the window of the kitchen door. No problem there.

But when he swung the door open and looked over toward the corner table, he nearly dropped the tray. Sly was sitting next to Victoria, and the two of them were looking way too friendly.

Tony had been gone eight minutes, but he bet it hadn't taken Sly eight seconds to make his move. Worse—Victoria was giving Sly the same brilliant smile she'd just flashed at Tony!

Tony marched up to the table and plunked down the tray. Putting his head between Sly's and Victoria's, he said, "What do you think you're doing, Sylvester?"

Victoria giggled, and Tony explained, "This bozo and I are old friends." Turning back to Sly, he added, "Don't you have an appointment with your dentist today, Sylvester?"

"With the dentist?" Sly repeated. "For what?"

"For the teeth you're about to lose," Tony explained, still smiling.

"He's got a great sense of humor, doesn't he?" Sly asked Victoria, putting his hand over hers. "Tony, Victoria and I are just getting to know each other. Why don't you leave the food and go back to work? You know how Sharkey feels about the help fraternizing with the customers." Sly shot him a sugary grin and wiggled his eyebrows.

Tony wanted to stay and hold his ground, but he realized that Sly had a point. Tony did have to watch out for Sharkey's temper, especially since he'd already crossed his boss twice in the last fifteen minutes.

Tony put the burger and fries in front of Victoria. But as he lifted the milk shake, he "accidentally" spilled some—right on Sly's shirt! "Oops," he said apologetically. "Sorry, Sly. I guess you'd better go to the men's room and clean that off."

Sly looked stunned for a second. But then he recovered his contented expression. He wiped the shirt with his napkin and said, "It's just a shirt, Tony. There are other shirts. This seat, on the other hand, is one of a kind."

There was no point in going on with this, Tony knew. He'd only be making a geek of himself by sinking to Sly's totally low tactics. Gritting his teeth, Tony walked away. When he glanced back, Victoria was deep in conversation with Sly.

Snap out of it, Wicks, he said to himself, fight-

ing off a wave of jealousy. There'll be other times and other ladies. You're still the best-looking guy in the galaxy.

Consoling himself with that thought, Tony got back to work behind the counter. But every minute or so, he'd take a jealous look at Sly and Victoria, who were laughing and talking up a storm.

Finally Victoria got up to go. Bending over the table, she wrote something on her napkin with a pen, then stuffed the note in Sly's shirt pocket with a sweet smile. Sly stood there gawking as she walked out of Sharkey's. When he bopped over to the counter, where Tony was filling a tray full of catsup bottles, the look on his face was sickeningly triumphant.

"Whoa! I'm in heaven!" Sly said, doing a little dance step. "The girl is bonkers for me! She was having a hard time controlling herself, I could tell!"

"I'm not gonna forget this, Sly," Tony told him. "You don't move in on your old friend's new acquaintance of the female persuasion—not when she looks like that!"

"What is this, more 'Wicks's Rules of Romance'?" Sly asked sardonically. "Hey, Tony, I can't help it. She's a goner for me. Did you see her stuff her number in my pocket?"

"Yeah," Tony said, sighing.

With a smug grin, Sly pulled the note out of his pocket and unfolded it. But as he read it, his jaw dropped open in surprise.

"What is it?" Tony wanted to know. Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed the note from Sly. It said: "Nice try, Romeo."

Ha! Tony thought, gloating. So, Victoria had seen right through Sly from the very beginning!

"I don't get it," Sly was saying. "How could she have failed to respond to my obvious and overpowering charms?"

Tony was about to reply when Heather called out to him. "Hey, Tony, you'd better go pick up your tip from table five. It's a big one."

Good old Heather, Tony thought. She could have taken the tip for herself, and he would never have known it. He went over to the table where Victoria had been sitting. There, to his astonishment, he saw a ten-dollar bill!

Tony picked it up and noticed that there was a note under the bill. He lifted it slowly, carefully turning away from Sly so that he wouldn't see.

Tony's breath caught in his throat when he saw what Victoria had written.

It was a telephone number—and the number had a big lipstick heart drawn around it!

Chapter 2

With her periwinkle book bag slung over her shoulder, Tiffani Smith headed out of Pacific Coast High toward Matt Garrison's house for a rehearsal with California Dreams. The Dreams met every day they could after school, in the Garrisons' garage.

Mr. and Mrs. Garrison seemed to enjoy having the Dreams' music close by—even though Mr. Garrison had once complained that the music could be heard a mile away. Matt and Jenny's little brother, Dennis, often hung around to listen, too.

Tiffani had just hit the sidewalk when she heard Randi Jo's voice calling her from the school steps.

"Tiffani! Hi," Randi Jo said, coming over and giving her a big smile.

"Hi, Randi Jo," Tiffani said. "How's every-

thing? Working hard on the next edition of The Clarion?" The Clarion was PCHS's student newspaper, and Randi Jo was its student editor.

"Actually, that's what I want to talk to you about, Tiffani. Could we walk together?"

"Sure thing," Tiffani said, hoisting her bag and starting down the sidewalk with Randi Jo beside her. "What's up?"

"Well, I've been thinking it would be really cool to have an 'Advice to the Lovelorn' column in the paper," Randi Jo began. "You know, kids could write in for advice about dating and stuff. I thought we'd call the adviser Dr. Heart. You know, like, 'Dear Dr. Heart'?"

"That sounds like so much fun!" Tiffani bubbled. "I can't wait to read it."

"Yes, but I want you to do more than read it, Tif." Randi Jo looked at her eagerly, but Tiffani didn't get her drift. What was Randi Jo hinting at? she wondered.

"I talked to the senior student editor of UCLA's paper, and he said the key to a romance column was to get the perfect person to write it. Someone who's understanding and open—someone relentlessly positive...."

"Oh, I see!" Tiffani said, suddenly getting the picture. "You want me to be Dr. Heart!"

"Exactly." Randi Jo gave her a pleading look. "I know you'd do a great job, Tiffani. Please?"

"Wow. Just think," Tiffani whispered, stopping to imagine it. "Me, a newspaper columnist! I've always wanted to help people, and this is the perfect way! I mean, if I can get people to see the bright side, even when they're feeling down, I'll really feel great about myself."

"So you'll do it?" Randi Jo asked.

"For sure!" Tiffani hugged Randi Jo out of sheer happiness.

"Uh, there's just one thing, though," Randi Jo cautioned, looking Tiffani square in the eye. "You absolutely can't tell a single, solitary soul you're doing this. Dr. Heart's identity has to be kept top secret. You can't even tell Jenny."

"But why?" Tiffani asked, stunned.

"The UCLA editor said that people feel more comfortable talking about their feelings if they're writing to a stranger. If they know it's you, they won't open up as much."

"Hmm." Tiffani saw Randi Jo's point, but keeping a secret this big was going to be torture.

"Still want to do it? I'll understand if you don't," Randi Jo said.

"Oh, no, I'll do it," Tiffani assured her, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Even though you won't get any credit for the great job you'll be doing?" Randi Jo asked.

"Well, I'll just take my own advice and look at

the bright side," Tiffani said. "If I do a lousy job, nobody will know it's me!"

• • •

"Come on, people," Sly Winkle urged the band members later that afternoon. "If we keep up like this, today's practice will end up being a total waste. Look at you guys—Tony's got a big smile on his face, for some strange reason which I do not comprehend, and his mind is a million miles away."

"Hold on, Sly," Tony shot back. "What makes you think my mind's not on my drumming?"

"Oh, just the fact that you've been playing 'Part of My Heart' in three-quarter time instead of four-four. That's all. Any truth to the rumor that you're not really here?"

"Aw, lay off, Sly," Matt said. "If Tony's got other things on his mind, that's his business, not ours. Everybody's got a right to—"

"Speaking of which," Sly said, turning to Matt, "what's up with *you*? You look like your pet gerbil just died."

"Cut it out, Sly," Matt told him. "I don't want to talk about it."

"It? You mean Randi Jo," Sly said, nodding. "Okay. Fair enough, as lame excuses go. And what about you, Tiffani?"

"Me?" Tiffani pointed to herself, surprised.

"Yes, you," Sly replied. "Why is it that you keep jumping up and down all during the songs? Is there something you want to tell us, or do you just need to be unplugged?"

"I don't know what you're taking about," Tiffani said, shrugging and biting her lip. "I feel perfectly fine."

Sly turned to Jenny and said, "It looks like you and I are the only normal ones in this place."

"You? Normal?" Jenny replied dryly, fluffing up her short, henna-toned hair. "I wouldn't go that far." Sly was attracted to Jenny in a major way, and everyone in the band knew it. On the other hand, whatever affection Jenny held for Sly was strictly of the friendly variety. Still, that didn't seem to deter Sly. In fact, *nothing* deterred Sly.

"Listen, how about we all just bag this practice and go over to Sharkey's for shakes?" Sly suggested.

"No, thanks," Matt said. "I've got homework to do."

"I've got to get home, too," Tony said, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and stuffing it back in again. Sly wondered what it was. It looked kind of like a Sharkey's napkin.

"And I've got work to do," Tiffani said, her eyes shifting.

"Well," Sly said with a crooked grin, turning to Jenny. "It looks like it's just you and me. Alone at last!"

"No way," Jenny said to Sly. "I'm not going to Sharkey's if it's just us two."

"And why not?" Sly asked, acting hurt.

Jenny looked him up and down. "Because I don't believe in cruelty to animals," she joked. "Down, boy."

"You wound me, Jennifer," Sly said, staggering back in mock pain. Suddenly recovering his health, he said, "Oh, well, see you guys at our next practice. *If* you've recovered by then." With that, he headed out the garage's side door.

Walking back to his car, Sly's thoughts were troubled. His band was losing its focus, and that was a very dangerous thing. When the Beatles started losing focus, they were broken up a year later! Sly wasn't about to let that happen to *his* band.

No. What California Dreams needed was a gig—a big one—to give them something to look forward to, a sense of momentum.

Yeah, that's it, Sly assured himself. A big, big gig. Now, where in the world am I going to find one?

* * *

"Okay, Tiffani," Jenny said as soon as Sly was gone. "What's going on with you? Something's got you excited, I can tell."

Tiffani bit her lip and looked down at the floor.

"Come on, you can tell us," Jenny said. But when Tiffani still didn't answer, Jenny turned to Matt

and Tony. "Would you guys mind splitting? There are some things girls can only say to other girls."

Matt and Tony glanced at each other, looking just slightly insulted. "I've got to go, anyway," Tony said. "Later." Grabbing his drumsticks, he left the garage without any further good-byes.

"Boy, Tony's really out of it," Matt commented as he gathered up his music. "I wonder what's gotten into him."

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe he's in love or something."

"Not Tony," Matt said with a chuckle. "He likes playing the field. Have you ever, ever known him to focus on one girl and forget about all the others?"

"I guess you've got a point," Jenny agreed. Finally, Matt went into the house.

Jenny watched him go. Then she turned to her friend. "Okay, Tiffani," she said. "What's up?"

"I can't talk about it," Tiffani said softly. "Sorry."

"Tiffani, you're my best friend. There's nothing you can't tell me!"

"Yes, there is," Tiffani said, getting up and walking toward the door. "Trust me. There is. I'm sorry, Jenny." She quickly gathered up her things and left the garage, her mind in chaos.

What was she going to do now? Tiffani wondered. She wanted so badly to tell Jenny, but she'd promised Randi Jo to keep her new job a secret! On

the other hand, what if Jenny took her silence the wrong way?

Suddenly, being Dr. Heart was beginning to look like a mailbag full of trouble.

• • •

"Hey, Tony, what's up with you tonight?" Jasmine stared at him from across the table at Gino's Italian Restaurant that Saturday night, her huge brown eyes searching his. "You seem like something's on your mind. You haven't heard a word I've said."

Tony felt like he'd been caught committing a crime. "Of course I heard you, Jasmine!" he protested, squeezing her hand and giving her a warm look.

"Really? All right then, what do *you* think about it?" she asked.

"Me? About what?" Tony gave her an innocent look, but it obviously didn't fool Jasmine. She stared back at him, shaking her head, with a wry smile on her lips.

"Okay, okay, I wasn't listening. You're right, baby, and I'm sorry. Now, what was it you were saying?"

"Never mind about that," Jasmine said, crossing her arms on her chest. "Obviously, it's not nearly as interesting as whatever you were thinking about. So why don't you tell me all about it, hmm?" She cocked her head teasingly, giving him a warm smile.

Tony squirmed in his seat. He liked Jasmine—a

lot. In fact, of all the girls he'd dated in the last year, he liked her the best. But how in the world was he going to explain to her that what he'd been thinking about was a red-haired girl named Victoria?

"Oh, I've just had a lot on my mind lately," he hedged.

"I see." Jasmine leaned forward, serious now, and took his hand. "Want to talk about it?"

Tony thought of the phone number in his wallet, the number he'd wanted to call ever since Tuesday afternoon. He'd picked up the phone to call more than once, but he'd hung up every time. He'd never been so nervous about calling a girl before, and he couldn't understand why he felt like that now. All he knew was that he'd been thinking of Victoria's red hair and big blue eyes and sweet, silky voice every single second. Not exactly a subject he could pour his heart out to Jasmine about. . . .

"Jasmine, it's not something I can put into words right now."

Jasmine let go of his hand. "Oh. Okay, Tony," she said. "But I hope you know you can talk to me anytime, about anything."

"Sure, baby. I know that. Thanks." Tony checked his watch without really caring what time it was. "Well, it's getting late," he said, getting up. "I'd better get you home."

Jasmine checked her own watch and raised her

eyebrows in surprise. "Late? Tony, it's only nine-thirty! Come on, what's really going on?"

"I'm—I'm just tired, that's all, Jasmine," he assured her. "Like I said, I've had a lot on my mind—I haven't slept too well the last few nights."

Jasmine looked up at him. "Oh, Tony," she said. "Why don't you tell me about it? I won't tell anybody."

"Um, maybe some other time, baby," Tony said with a nervous smile. "Right now, I really am tired." He gave an exaggerated yawn, then reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet to pay for their dinner. But as he opened it to take out his money, the paper napkin with Victoria's number on it fell to the floor and landed right at Jasmine's feet. *Faceup.*

Jasmine stared at it and bit her lip. She didn't say a word.

"Gee, I don't know how that got in there," Tony mumbled, reaching down to pick it up. He couldn't even look Jasmine in the eye, he felt so embarrassed. "It's from a long time ago," he lied.

The rest of their time together was awkward for both of them. Neither said much. Tony paid the bill and drove Jasmine home. When he walked her to her door, he gave her an affectionate good-night kiss. But his heart wasn't in it, and Jasmine knew it.

"I'll call you soon, baby," he assured her.

She smiled back and nodded before turning away.

Tony watched her go, then walked back to his car. He was grateful to Jasmine for not being *too* curious. He felt badly that she'd seen the phone number.

But now Jasmine was gone—and the number was still in his pocket. Spotting a pay phone at the corner, Tony drove to it and pulled over. He'd been avoiding this moment all week, he told himself. It was now or never.

As he lifted the receiver, he felt a wave of nervousness come over him. "Weird," he said out loud. He was almost *too* excited. For a second he considered putting the note back in his pocket and letting it go till another time. Then he shook the feeling off and punched in the number.

He had to know! Was something going to happen with Victoria, or wasn't it? Either way, he knew he would have to level with Jasmine. He hadn't been fair to her tonight. If Victoria was for real, he'd have to let Jasmine down easy. If not—well, he didn't know what he'd do.

The phone rang and rang. Saturday night, ten o'clock . . . she's probably out on a date, Tony told himself. Of course she is, a girl like that. . . .

He was about to hang up when he heard her voice.

"Hello?"

The sound froze Tony to the spot. "Hello . . . Victoria? This is Tony Wicks—we met the other day at Sharkey's? You left your number for me. Remember?" He braced himself against the pay phone, in case she laughed at him and told him it was all a joke.

But what she really said made his heart take a flying leap inside his chest.

"Tony—I thought you'd never call."

Chapter 3

Whoa! Tony closed his eyes and tried to picture her face as she spoke to him. He'd already forgotten the fine points of her features, but, hey—this was his chance to get to know her better! "I'm glad to hear you say that, Victoria, 'cause I thought you and Sly were getting pretty friendly over at that table."

The giggle that came over the line was the same one that had given him rubber knees at Sharkey's. "Sly? Get real, Tony. You're the one who made the big impression on me."

"I did?" Tony's mouth suddenly felt as dry as dust. "Um, just what was it about me that made an impression on you?"

Before Victoria could answer, the operator cut

in. "Please deposit five cents for the next five minutes," the computer-generated voice crackled.

"Oh, Tony, I didn't know you were calling from a pay phone," Victoria said. "Quick. Give me the number and I'll call you right back."

Tony read it out to her and hung up. Then he waited. And waited. Just when he thought she wasn't going to call back, the phone rang. "Sorry," she said. "I went downstairs and got the cordless. Now we can be more comfortable."

"Good," Tony said, grinning. Turning, he saw a man pull his car over and get out, fishing for change in his pocket.

"I gave you my number because I wanted to get to know you better," Victoria said. "Something about you struck me—something different, something that set you apart from the other guys I know. But I was beginning to think you weren't going to call me."

"Um, I was busy till tonight," Tony lied. "I did try you once, but nobody answered." Another fib, but, hey—the truth was mystical, unknowable, and extremely hard to explain.

"Probably because I was out," she said.

"Out?" Tony repeated, suddenly coming back down to earth. "Are you seeing someone special?"

"Well, I guess you might call Edward special—he's very intelligent. In fact, his mother won the Nobel Prize in physics. But I'm kind of bored with

Edward. Anyway, enough about him. When can we get together?"

Tony was speechless. For the first time he could remember, he wasn't ready with a clever line. Then again, he'd never been in a situation where the girl made all the moves, where all he had to do was follow along.

"Tony? Are you still there?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm here. And, sure, I'd love to get together. How about . . . um, Tuesday night? I work till six, but I'm free after that."

"Super," Victoria said, giving him that giggle again. "I'll pick you up at Sharkey's after your shift. We can take my car."

"All right! See you then, Victoria."

"Ciao, handsome." The phone went dead with a click, and Tony lowered it into its cradle.

"Whoa, baby!" he whooped. "Yes! All right! Outstanding!" Turning around, he saw three puzzled faces staring at him, waiting their turn to use the phone. "Uh, sorry," Tony mumbled, jogging back to his car.

"Yes!" he whispered as he got in and drove off. "Wicks, you irresistible hunk, you. Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

• • •

"Is this ridiculous, or what?" Sly Winkle asked Tiffani as they stood in front of Pacific Coast High. It was eight-thirty Monday morning, and Sly was hold-

ing up a copy of Friday's *Clarion* for her to see. "'Advice to the Lovelorn'? Dr. Heart? Give me a break! I mean, this is totally infantile!"

"Oh, I don't know, Sly," Tiffani said, trying not to feel hurt. "Everywhere I went all weekend, kids were reading about the new column, and they all seemed to like the idea."

"Well, trust me, it's going to be a big bomb. Dr. Heart is probably some dweeb who's never even been on a date."

Tiffani wanted to argue with him, to say it wasn't true and that good advice could really help people, but she was afraid she might reveal her secret. "Maybe when you read the actual column, you'll change your mind," she suggested with a shrug.

"Only *you* could find something to like about a cornball idea like this, Tiffani," Sly said, shaking his head and grinning. He tucked the paper under his arm and walked up the stairs, leaving Tiffani staring after him.

"Hey, Tif!" Tiffani turned to see Matt. "Did you read this? There's going to be a new column in the paper, 'Advice to the Lovelorn.' Pretty cool, huh?"

"Thanks! I mean, do you think so?" Tiffani tried to repress a grin but couldn't.

"In fact," Matt added, "I was thinking of writing in for some advice myself."

"You were?" Tiffani asked. "You mean, about Randi Jo?"

"Uh-huh." Matt sighed and stuffed the paper into his book bag. "I'm still kind of hung up on her, I guess. Maybe Dr. Heart can help."

"Sounds like a great idea," Tiffani said encouragingly. "Why don't you do it?"

"Actually, I sort of typed a letter up last night," Matt confessed.

"That's fantastic, Matt!" Tiffani told him. "Good for you!"

"Well, here's the thing, though," Matt said with a sigh. "It says in the paper that submissions have to be in by today at three o'clock. But I'm afraid if I submit the letter I wrote, Randi Jo will know it's me, and it might turn her off, you know? I mean, this was all supposed to be okay, about us being friends. And obviously she doesn't miss me at all. . . ."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that, Matt."

"Why? Has she talked to you about me?" Matt asked, suddenly alert and interested.

"No," Tiffani admitted. "Sorry. But I do think you should submit your letter. So what if Randi Jo thinks it's you? She'll probably be touched. And, anyway, since you don't sign your real name on the letter, she can't be sure it's you. It's a big school, after all. Just keep in mind that she will be reading it, and try to tell her how you really feel. If it does turn her off, you two probably shouldn't be going together, anyway."

"Gee, Tif, you're right," Matt said, giving her a warm smile. "You're pretty good at analyzing these things, you know? Maybe *you* should be Dr. Heart."

"Gee, thanks, Matt," Tiffani said, feeling herself flushing a little. "But I'm sure Dr. Heart knows a lot more about love than I do," she added modestly.

"Well, maybe," Matt said. "Anyway, would you mind reading my letter before I bring it up to the *Clarion* office? I'd like to know what you think of it."

Tiffani checked the clock on the wall. They still had five minutes before first period. "Okay," she said with a big grin.

Matt reached into his book bag and handed over the letter. Opening it, Tiffani read:

Dear Dr. Heart:

It's hard for me to write this letter because I know I'm not supposed to feel this way. I was going with the most fantastic girl I'd ever met, but then I guess I messed things up. I was too involved in the things that mattered to me, and I didn't show enough interest in the things she cared about. Anyway, she broke up with me, saying she wanted to be just friends. I told her it was fine with me.

But the truth is, it isn't fine at

all. The other day, I saw her with another guy, and I got so upset I could barely talk. I thought I could handle this, but I need some advice. What should I do?

Signed,
Lovesick

"Matt, it's a beautiful letter," Tiffani whispered.

Matt flashed a broad grin. "Do you really think so?" he asked.

"Definitely!" Tiffani assured him. "And if you don't want to bring it up to the *Clarion* office yourself—I could do it for you!"

"You would do that for me?" Matt asked.

"Sure! No problem," Tiffani said.

"Thanks, Tif! You're a great friend," Matt told her, giving her a little peck on the cheek. With a wave, he ran up the steps to his first class. Tiffani stuffed his letter into her book bag.

No sooner had Matt gone than Randi Jo came up to Tiffani with a big brown envelope in her hand. "Hi, Doc," she said softly, giving Tiffani a wink. "Everyone in the school's talking about you. Here are your first five letters, and just think—it's only Monday morning!"

"Wow!" Tiffani said, taking the big envelope.

"Cool, huh?" Randi Jo put a finger to her lips as

she saw Jenny approaching. "Remember, mum's the word."

Tiffani winced. "Randi Jo, can't I just tell Jenny?"

"No! Not a soul!" Randi Jo whispered. "Remember, Tiffani, you promised!"

"Okay," Tiffani said, stuffing the envelope into her book bag as Jenny came up to them.

"Hi, guys," Jenny said with a warm smile. "What's up?"

"Hi, Jenny," Randi Jo replied quickly. "Well, I'd better get going. Bye."

Jenny's expression darkened. "Did I interrupt something?" she asked. "You two looked pretty chummy. And then Randi Jo leaves as soon as I get here? Weird."

"I wouldn't take it personally if I were you," Tiffani suggested with a shrug.

"You wouldn't?" Jenny said stiffly. "And what about that envelope you hid the minute you saw me? Should I not take that personally, either?"

"Um, no, you shouldn't," Tiffani said, trying to sound bright. "Really."

"Really?" Jenny repeated, searching Tiffani's eyes. "You wouldn't take it personally if you were me?"

"Of course not!" Tiffani said. "I'd give my friend the benefit of the doubt."

"Well, sorry, but I do take it personally," Jenny said, frowning. "I thought we were best friends, and in my book, best friends don't keep secrets from each other. See you later."

Tiffani watched Jenny go, wanting to stop her and tell her the truth. But how could she do that? She'd given Randi Jo her word, and she had to keep it.

Only now she wondered if keeping her promise was worth losing the best friend she'd ever had!

Chapter 4

Tony had just gotten to Sharkey's that Tuesday after school, and started his shift at the counter, when Jasmine walked in, wearing a big smile.

Tony smiled back. He liked Jasmine; he liked her a lot. It's just that he didn't want to date her exclusively or anything.

"Hi, Jasmine," he said, "It's good to see you." Actually, he had to fight back feeling a little guilty that he hadn't called her since their date Saturday night. He knew he hadn't exactly been fair to her that night—it was just that his mind had been totally focused on Victoria.

And it still was. Tonight she was picking him up here at six for their first date. What would it be like? Would they really click? Would he be his usual brand of cool?

"Tony, did you hear what I just said?" Jasmine asked, giving him a worried look.

"Um, no, I was just thinking of something," he confessed. "Tell me again."

"I was just saying," Jasmine continued, sounding a little hurt, "that I was looking forward to tonight."

"Tonight?" Tony repeated with a gulp. "What's tonight? Did I forget something?"

To Tony's surprise, Jasmine giggled. "Tony, tonight is the African-American New Film Festival, remember? We're going to see Jowan Johnston's new movie, *Hit the Nerve*, at eight o'clock."

"Oh, right," Tony assured her, lying through his teeth. "Of course." Scenes of disaster raced across the movie screen in Tony's mind. What was he going to do? Victoria was picking him up at six, and he was supposed to take Jasmine to the movie at eight? Yaaaaah!

"Yeah, I'll see you later, Jasmine," Tony said flatly, swallowing hard and trying to force a smile. "Bye, now. I've got to get to work."

Giving her a quick kiss, Tony threw himself into his job with a passion. The next time he turned around to look, Jasmine was gone.

Tony spent the rest of his shift trying to think of a way out. Maybe he could take Jasmine to the late show? Sure! He could make it an early night with Victoria, then turn around and pick up Jasmine!

But when he checked the movie listings in the paper, he saw that there was no late showing of *Hit the Nerve*. Tony thought of canceling his date with Victoria, but only for a second. He was too excited about seeing her. And if he blew this chance, he might not ever get another one.

He would just have to level with Jasmine—tell her the truth. She would understand. She would just *have* to understand. They weren't going steady, after all, and there was no reason on earth why he shouldn't be dating someone else.

Determined that he'd found the right solution and proud of himself for finding it, he strode to the phone booth and dialed Jasmine's number. As it rang, he looked up at the clock. Five forty-five.

In fifteen minutes, Victoria would be walking through that door. They would be together all evening. He didn't know where and didn't even care. All he knew was, he wanted it to work out with every fiber of his being.

"Hello?" Jasmine's voice sounded in the receiver.

"Jasmine, it's Tony." Suddenly his heart was thumping and his throat had turned to dust. "I called because—because I, uh, I can't make it tonight. I've got to visit my sick grandmother in L.A."

Tony felt like a dog, a low-down, dirty dog. He should have told her the truth and he knew it. Now she was going to be even more hurt if she ever found

out. But then there was always the hope that she never would.

"Oh, Tony, I'm so sorry she's sick," Jasmine said sympathetically. "Do you want me to come with you? We could see the movie another time. . . ."

"Come with me? Um, no! No!" Why did she have to be such a nice person? Tony wondered. And why didn't he feel the same "zing" for her that he did for Victoria? It was a question he couldn't answer.

"Thanks, Jasmine," he said. "But I think I'd rather be alone with my family tonight. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Tony," she said. "I understand. You just give your grandmother my best wishes, okay?"

"I will. Bye." Tony hung up, feeling like a snake. But when he looked at the clock on the wall, he forgot all his bad feelings. It was five to six! He ran to the closet, got his good clothes, and hurried into the men's room to change, a rush of excitement coming over him.

When he got back out front, Victoria was already there, standing by the counter and looking even better than he remembered her. And this time, he wasn't a lowly, burger-bringin', french-fryin', milk-shakin' servant of King Sharkey. No way. He was a sharp-lookin' dude on a date with a beautiful lady.

"Come on," she said into his ear as he offered her his arm. "Let me take you to my car."

He followed her outside, then froze in his tracks when he saw it—a red Porsche convertible!

"Goodness gracious, great balls of fire!" Tony said under his breath, looking it over.

"Do you like it?" Victoria asked him. "My mom and dad got it for me last year on my birthday. If you're very nice to me, I might even let you drive it later."

Nuzzling his cheek, she gave his arm a squeeze and went around to the driver's side. Moments later they were cruising down the boulevard, heading south, toward who knew where. As far as Tony was concerned, he was already in heaven.

This chick is rich, he said to himself. *R, I, C, capital H! Well, hey! Why not?*

But when she turned the car into the parking lot of a softly lit French restaurant, Tony began to get nervous. He had never been in this place, but he knew enough about restaurants to realize that this night was going to cost him a hunk of change. And if they started dating on a regular basis, he would never be able to treat her in the style to which she was obviously accustomed.

Well, no matter what, he was not about to let her think he was cheap. He walked her inside the posh restaurant, with its fabric wall coverings and art in gilt-edged frames. They followed the hostess to a quiet booth.

The menu was all in French, but Tony could read the prices well enough to start sweating. The entrées started at twenty-five dollars—and that was without any extras!

Tony squirmed. He had seventy dollars with him, and it might not even be enough to pay for dinner!

"The food is great here," Victoria said, taking his hand and giving him a melting look. "And they know me, so we'll get good service."

Tony knew he had to come clean now if he was going to save himself from a major disaster. "Victoria," he said nervously, "I hate to say it, but I don't think I can afford to take you to a place like this. I mean, I don't exactly have a huge amount of, you know—"

"Money?" Victoria guessed. "Forget it, Tony—I mean, you must have noticed that I come from a family that's kind of well off."

"Well off?" Tony repeated with a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I'd say so. Although that wasn't the word I was going to use. 'Rolling in dough' was more like it."

"There are lots of people who are richer than my family," Victoria said, holding his hand tightly. "But money means nothing to me, believe me. I was planning on treating tonight, anyway."

"Well, I don't need you to pay for me," Tony protested.

"Nonsense, I insist," Victoria commanded.

"Order whatever you like, and let's enjoy our time together. Talking about money is such a waste of time. My parents do it constantly, and trust me, nothing is more boring."

Tony leaned back, taking her in again. This girl was fantastic! She cared about what was inside him, not whether he had money or not. And she was willing to pay for everything!

Tony decided to accept her offer. Even though he wasn't a hundred percent comfortable yet, he was pretty sure he could get used to the arrangement, at least for tonight. When the waiter came, he pointed to one of the entrées and nodded. "I'll take this."

But when Victoria giggled, and whispered in his ear, "I hope you like snails," Tony let her do the ordering for both of them.

When the waiter had gone, she said, "Being quote unquote 'rich' is really no great thing, you know. It's like, people think money buys a perfect life. So if you're unhappy, they think you're a spoiled brat."

"Are you unhappy, Victoria?" Tony asked. "You don't seem unhappy. In fact, from what I've seen, I'd say just the opposite."

"That's because I'm with you," she said, curling her lip teasingly. "No, I really mean it. You're so different from the guys I usually date. They're so boring. All they talk about is what kind of car they drive,

what style of clothes they wear, or where they're going on vacation."

"Sounds good to me," Tony said with a smile, but she didn't seem to hear him.

"You're different, Tony," she said. "I can tell."

"Well, I don't have as much money as your other friends, that's for sure," he pointed out.

"That's definitely in your favor," she replied with a grin.

"And I'm black," Tony added, pointing out the obvious.

But the reaction he got surprised him. Victoria grew red in the face and angry. "Are you saying I'm dating you because you're black?" she asked in a hurt voice, yanking her hand away. "That's really insulting!"

The storm came on so suddenly that Tony was caught totally off guard. Now he hurried to smooth the waters. "Wait a minute!" he said quickly. "I didn't mean that at all. I just meant that you probably haven't dated many African Americans—which is fine with me, 'cause I like people without regard to race, creed, or color. It's what's inside that counts; that's what I always say."

"Exactly," Victoria said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get upset. It's just that, well, race is something else that shouldn't get in the way when two people like each other."

"Now you're talkin', mama," Tony said, grinning.

"Well, I've told you all about myself," she said as the waiter put their food in front of them. "Tell me about you."

"Me? Well, I love music."

"Really! I love music, too!" Victoria cooed. "What kind of music?"

"Rock, pop, rhythm and blues, jazz—I love it all. I play the drums in a band. Have you ever heard of California Dreams?"

Victoria shook her head. "No," she said. "But I'm sure they're fantastic if *you* play with them. Is that guy Sly part of the band?"

"Sort of—he's our manager," Tony told her. "Would you like to come hear us practice sometime?"

"Definitely!" Victoria said, zinging him a major smile. "Oh, I am so glad this is happening!" she added, gazing into his eyes. "Tony, do you feel like I do?"

"I don't know, but I hope so," Tony replied, returning her gaze. "I sure do hope so!"

By the time they'd finished dinner, Tony was floating on air. "What now?" he asked, as she took out her platinum credit card and paid for their dinner.

"Now I've got a surprise for you," she announced. "We're going somewhere very special."

Tony played right along. They talked about other things as she drove them down the boulevard,

back toward Redondo Beach. Then she hung a right and pulled into a parking spot—right in front of the movie theater where Hit the Nerve was playing!

What are you worried about, Wicks? Tony asked himself as they walked to the ticket line. *Jasmine wouldn't have come here without me, would she? No way will she be here.*

But as they took their seats, Tony saw the back of Jasmine's familiar head sitting five rows in front of them—alone. He quickly offered to buy Victoria some soda and popcorn and hurried out to the lobby. He came back when the lights in the theater had gone down, and everything was dark.

Tony wasn't able to pay much attention to the movie. He was too busy watching the back of Jasmine's head and ducking whenever she moved the slightest bit.

Once, during an exciting car chase, Victoria asked him if he was all right and accepted his nod as an answer. Thankfully, she seemed pretty absorbed in the story.

When the movie ended and the lights came back up, Tony knew he had to act fast. He more or less pulled Victoria to her feet and dragged her out of the theater. "It was hard to breathe in there," he explained when she shot him a puzzled look.

"Do you have asthma or something?" she asked him, looking concerned. "Fear of crowds, maybe?"

"Maybe," Tony said with a shrug. "But it only happens once in a while." *You'd better hope so, Wicks,* he added silently to himself. "Come on, let's go," he said.

"Where?" Victoria asked, holding her ground. Looking up, Tony saw Jasmine coming out of the theater, walking in their direction. Quickly he fell to his knees, pretending he'd dropped something, and hoping that Jasmine would pass by before he got up.

But the trick backfired. Kneeling must have drawn Jasmine's attention, because when Tony looked up, she was staring right at him, with a shocked expression on her face.

"Are you all right, Tony?" Victoria asked.

Jasmine looked from Tony to Victoria, then back to Tony again. Before he could say a word, she turned and stormed off down the street.

"Tony, what's going on?" Victoria asked.

"Nothing, baby," Tony assured her, getting to his feet. "Nothing at all. Just thought I dropped something."

Now he'd gone and done it! Why hadn't he just leveled with Jasmine from the very beginning? He'd made a total fool of himself and hurt her feelings in the worst possible way.

It was getting late, so Victoria drove him home. On the way, they passed Jasmine walking down the street. Tony slumped down low in the seat as they

passed her, but he was sure she'd seen him. He could feel her eyes, like a laser beam, focusing on the back of his head.

"You're so quiet, Tony," Victoria said as she pulled over in front of his house ten minutes later. "Did you have a good time?"

"Oh, yeah," he assured her. "I had a fantastic time, Victoria. Being with you is like—well, let me just say it this way—I hope we can see each other again soon. Real soon."

"Like when?" Victoria asked. "Can I come to a band practice?"

"Well, unfortunately, I have to work tomorrow after school. Sharkey's running a two-for-one special on shakes, and the place has been hopping. The Dreams aren't practicing again till Friday. Can you come then?"

"Sure!"

Feeling like he was about to burst, Tony smiled widely. He couldn't wait to see the look on Sly's face when Victoria walked in on his arm. Tony let out a deep breath and gazed into Victoria's eyes. But suddenly he saw Jasmine's tormented face in the back of his mind! The image shook him for a second, until Victoria's voice pulled him out of it.

"Well. Good-night, Tony Wicks. It was nice meeting you. Very, very nice. . . ."

Ever so slowly, she lowered her eyelids and inched her perfect pink lips toward his. He felt her

hair glide across his shoulder, then his cheek, as he closed his eyes and fell into a sweet, tender kiss.

Any thought of Jasmine flew from his mind. The only sound Tony could hear was the hammering of his very happy heart.

Chapter 5

"Poor Matt," Tiffani said with a sigh as she read his note again that Wednesday night, alone in her room. Then, staring at the pile of letters on her desk, she added, "Poor everybody!"

There had to be at least twenty of them. Twenty letters from heartbroken students of Pacific Coast High. And her responses had to be in by tomorrow morning to make Friday's edition of the paper! How could she possibly find time to answer them all?

She couldn't, of course. Anyhow, Randi Jo had told her there would only be room for three per issue. Tiffani felt terrible about all the letters that wouldn't get into the paper. Even so, this was going to be a full-time job. Between her homework, her job as Dr. Heart, and practicing with the Dreams, her life was going to be on overload from now on!

If only she could ask Jenny to help. Jenny was so levelheaded and practical. But Jenny had been acting pretty cool toward her lately. In fact, what Tiffani needed most of all right now was some good advice about how to keep her best friend!

Sitting at her desk, Tiffani decided to get to work. She laid Matt's letter to the side, and putting a sheet of paper into her typewriter, she typed:

Dear Lovesick:

Your situation is not an easy one. But you're not the first person ever to feel that way. Look around. There are lots of people in similar situations. What should you do? Hang in there, and don't get down on yourself. You're obviously a caring, well-meaning person.

Your old girlfriend says she wants to be friends? Well, be a good friend to her, and give her your love that way. If you stay friendly and positive, she'll probably want you back sooner or later.

Above all, don't get discouraged. All things come to those who wait.

Signed,
Dr. Heart

Tiffani examined her handiwork. Not bad for a first letter, she complimented herself. She hoped Matt would feel the same way, and that all the readers of her column who were in that same situation would get the message, too.

Putting Matt's letter aside, Tiffani reached for the one that had been bothering her all afternoon. It had arrived at *The Clarion* around lunchtime that day, and Tiffani hadn't stopped thinking about it since. Now she read it again:

Dear Dr. Heart:

There's this guy I really, really like, but I just found out he's been seeing another girl behind my back. It isn't that he's seeing someone else that bothers me—we weren't exclusive or anything. It's that he felt he had to hide it from me. He even lied to me about it.

I'd tell him how I feel, but here's the thing: This guy and I are black, and his new girlfriend is white. I keep thinking I shouldn't say anything, because it'll mean I'm prejudiced, and that's the reason I'm jealous. But I also know that what he did

was wrong, lying to me like that. I don't know what to do. Can you help me?

Signed,
Torn

Tiffani bit her lip, thinking hard. The letter had missed the deadline for this week's edition of the paper, but Tiffani decided to make an exception to the rule, just this once. The letter seemed so urgent, and besides, it dealt with some really serious issues.

She only wished she knew what to say. Tiffani picked up another piece of paper and tried to put herself in Torn's position.

Dear Torn:

You are in a really difficult situation. Prejudice is definitely wrong, but so is lying. And while you may or may not be prejudiced, he has definitely lied to you. Besides which, you have every right to feel jealous, if that's how you feel. Feelings aren't right or wrong. It's how we act on them that counts.

You need to have it out with this guy, even if it means he doesn't want to see you anymore.

If that's the case, you're better off without him. But somebody's got to point out that he's done wrong, and give him a chance to mend his ways. Anyway, if you tell the truth, at least you'll know where you stand.

Good luck,
Dr. Heart

Tiffani put down the pen. She blew out a deep breath and brushed back her long blond hair. Being an adviser was such a big responsibility. She'd never imagined how intense the experience would be! If she said the wrong thing—any wrong thing—people's hearts could be broken!

Crossing her fingers and hoping for the best, she took her first two responses and put them back into the big brown envelope. Tomorrow she'd give them and one more to Randi Jo, and they'd go into the paper, where hundreds of kids would read them.

Tiffani only hoped her advice was good. Oh, if only she could show her responses to Jenny!

• • •

Sly Winkle didn't bother to knock as he entered the Garrisons' house that Friday afternoon by way of the kitchen door. The Garrisons were like a second family to him, he reflected, helping himself to two of Mrs.

G's brownies before going back outside on his way to the garage.

With his mouth full, he couldn't call out his greetings to the band members, who would by now be eagerly awaiting his arrival. Through the half-opened side door to the garage, he heard Matt and Tiffani talking inside.

"Dr. Heart really gave me great advice," Matt was saying. "Did you read the response?"

Dr. Heart. Sly rolled his eyes. *"Dr. Heart's Advice to the Lovelorn." Give me a break,* he thought.

"Did you really like what it said?" Tiffani asked. "Because your letter was beautiful. It deserved a good response."

"Sure!" Matt said. "I feel so much better since I read it. It's like a heavy weight was lifted from my shoulders."

"Fantastic!" Tiffani said. "I am so glad to hear that."

Fantastic, Sly mimicked silently as he stood outside the garage door.

"Thanks for encouraging me to hand it in, Tiffani," Matt said. "Do you think Randi Jo will know it's me?"

"If she does, she'll love it," Tiffani replied. "Trust me."

Aha, Sly thought, slowly realizing what they were talking about. That letter in *The Clarion had* sounded familiar, now that he thought about it.

"What are you doing here, Sly? Snooping?" The surprise of hearing Jenny's voice in his ear nearly made Sly hit his head on the doorsill.

"No, love of my life," Sly returned, going inside. "I was just thinking about the big gig I'm working on for us."

"What big gig?" Matt asked as Sly entered the garage.

"A fraternity dance at UCLA!" Sly announced. "Thank you, thank you. No applause necessary. You can all just bow down and kiss my feet."

"Wait a minute," Jenny said skeptically. "I thought you said you were only *working* on getting us this gig."

"Technically, that's true," Sly admitted. "But, believe me, it's in the bag. Hey, where's Tony? I want to tell him the good news, too."

"The good news is right here, Sylvester," said Tony, coming in behind him.

Sly looked up. To his surprise, Tony was not alone. Holding his hand was—unbelievably—the drop-dead redhead from Sharkey's! The one who'd given him the brush-off and embarrassed him in front of his friend!

Here she was, with that very same friend, holding hands and looking into Tony's eyes like he was the greatest invention since the wheel!

"You can pick your jaw up off the floor, Sylvester," Tony said, with a satisfied grin on his face.

"Everybody, this is Victoria Wellington. Victoria, meet the Dreams—Matt, Jenny, Tiffani, and—well, you already know Sly. They're my best buddies, and the hottest band this side of the Sierra Madre," he exclaimed, slapping his hands together in sheer joy. "Sit right there, Victoria baby, and listen to some music straight from heaven. Yo, Matt, let's do 'Part of My Heart,' okay?"

Matt nodded and led the band through the song. Sly watched Victoria's face as the Dreams played. She was rocking to the beat, smiling. Her eyes never left Tony as he played the drums. After the song, Victoria clapped loudly and got up to compliment the other band members. Seeing his chance, Sly took Tony aside, casually slinging one arm around his shoulders.

"So, my man," Sly said with a conspiratorial grin. "You stole the babe right out from under my nose. I've gotta hand it to you, Tony, she is hot. I mean *hot*. What's your secret, dude?"

"Can it, Sylvester," Tony said, his smile vanishing. "Don't talk about Victoria like that. She's not just some babe, she's somebody special."

"Take it easy!" Sly protested. "I was just kidding."

"No problem," Tony said. "Just don't joke about her, okay?" Shrugging off Sly's arm, he went back behind his drum set and grabbed his sticks.

Whoa, Sly thought. *Tony is really gone. I mean,*

gaga, way over the cliff! I've gotta do something about this right away.

While the band settled down to play some more, Sly found a moment to signal Victoria that he wanted to talk with her. At first she shook her head no, but Sly kept up the motioning until, heaving an exasperated sigh, she got up and went over to him.

"I have to talk to you," he said into her ear as the music filled the room. "In private."

Rolling her eyes, Victoria followed him to the far corner of the garage. Sly turned to face her and smiled, oh, so sweetly.

"So," he began, "you and Tony are seeing each other."

"That's right," she said. "What about it? Do you have a problem with that?"

"I've known Tony a long time," Sly said. "We're old buddies. I know when he's in over his head."

"Do you?" Victoria's mouth curled into a foxy smile. "What else do you think you know?"

"I know that you play games with guys," Sly shot back. "You wrote me that cute little note, for instance. 'Nice try, Romeo'? Very funny. Oh, yeah, I know babes like you. And I don't want to see my old buddy get his heart broken."

"How sweet of you," Victoria said, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "Is that what you dragged me over here to say? Because if it is, I think you

should say it in front of Tony." She started to turn back toward the band, but Sly stopped her in a hurry.

"Okay, okay. Forget I said anything. Just do me one favor," Sly said. "Be good to him, okay? Because even if he is a fool about women, Tony's a great guy."

"You're breaking my heart," Victoria muttered. Then, suddenly, her eyes grew fierce, and she turned on Sly full force. "Look, Mr. Manager, if I feel like seeing Tony Wicks, I will. There's not a thing you can do about it. And if he's a fool about women, that's his problem, not yours. So why don't you just mind your own business and let your 'old buddy' take care of himself! Who knows—he might wind up being the big love of my life."

With a sarcastic smile, she turned and walked back to listen to the band play.

Sly stared after her and let out a low whistle. This chick was definitely a pistol!

There was only one problem. He didn't believe a word of it. Not one word. There was no way a stuck-up chick like that was going to fall head over heels for a down-home guy like Tony. More likely she would toy around with his feelings, then drop him without a second thought.

Of course, if he told Tony what he thought, Tony would say Sly was jealous.

Sly made himself a promise right then and there. Whatever happened, no way was he going to let this girl Victoria take advantage of his friend.

No way in the world.

Chapter 6

"Oh, hi, Jasmine. Long time no see." Tony felt the rush of blood to his cheeks and turned his eyes away from Jasmine's hurt gaze. The beach was crowded this Saturday afternoon, but Tony hadn't even thought about the possibility that he might run into her. In fact, he hadn't thought about her for one single second since Tuesday night, except to make sure he didn't run into her at school for the rest of the week. He wouldn't have known what to say to her—just like he didn't know what to say right now.

"Hello, Tony," she said, a catch in her voice. She kept looking at him, like she expected him to explain.

Oh, well, Tony thought. *Now's as good a time as any.* "Look, Jasmine, there's something I've been meaning to tell you. . . ."

"Go ahead, Tony. I can handle it."

"Huh?"

"Something tells me this is gonna be bad news," Jasmine told him.

"Yeah, well . . . I guess that's true. See, Jasmine, I met this girl last week. Her name's Victoria. I've seen her a few times and, well, we kind of like each other. In fact, I might even be in love with her."

"Are you saying you don't want to see me anymore?" she asked calmly.

"No! No, it's not that, it's just, well—not for a while, okay? I mean, you never know, I just met her and all, and it may not work out between us."

"That's not the way it looked on Tuesday night."

"Tuesday night?" Tony gulped. "Oh, that. Yeah, I'm sorry about telling you I was seeing my sick grandma. That was wrong."

"I'm glad you can see that," Jasmine said. "Well, I guess I know where I stand. See you around, then, huh?" She turned and started to walk away.

"Wait, Jasmine!" Tony called after her. When she stopped, he trotted over to her. "I'm sorry, baby. I know I've treated you badly, but that's why I say we should cool it for a while. I don't want to have to hide what I'm doing. And it wouldn't be fair to you any other way. You understand?"

"Sure, Tony. I understand. You met some girl a week ago, and you're already seeing her exclusively. I know when it's time to get out of the way. Bye." Again

she turned and walked off. This time Tony didn't try to stop her. He just watched as Jasmine's walk turned to a trot, and her hand went to her mouth.

Wicks, you've gone and done it now, he said to himself. *You better hope you made the right move, too.* Then he heard Victoria calling his name from behind. He turned to greet her, and all his doubts vanished in an instant.

• • •

It was Saturday afternoon, and Tiffani and Jenny had been cruising the clothing shops on Ocean Drive. It hadn't been as much fun as usual, Tiffani thought, and she figured it was because Jenny was still a little mad at her. Tiffani knew she couldn't tell Jenny her secret, but there *was* something she *could* talk about with her friend. Something that had been on her mind a lot for the past few days.

"Jenny, did you read the 'Lovelorn' column in yesterday's *Clarion*?" she asked as they tried on some shoes.

"Yeah," Jenny replied dully, tossing a pair of shoes back into the box.

"What did you think of it?" Tiffani asked.

"It was okay," Jenny replied. "Actually, I thought it was pretty good. I might even write in someday—*if* I ever fall in love again."

Tiffani was glad her friend liked the column, at least. "You'll fall in love again, Jen," she assured her.

"It hasn't been that long since Sean moved away. Give it some time." Jenny had been crazy about Sean Flynn, the lead guitarist of Solar Energy, until he and his family had moved to Seattle.

Jenny laughed. "Tiffani, you know, I could have told you you were going to say something like that. No matter how down somebody is, you've always got something cheerful to say. You know, *you* should have been Dr. Heart. You would have been perfect." With another laugh and a shake of her head, Jenny reached down for a different pair of shoes.

Tiffani felt a little hurt by Jenny's comment, but she decided that her friend didn't really mean it. Jenny was just hurt because she thought Tiffani was keeping secrets from her.

"Did you see that letter in the column, though?" she asked Jenny. "The one by the black girl who thought she was prejudiced because she was jealous that her boyfriend was seeing a girl who's white?"

"Yeah, that was interesting," Jenny said, nodding in recollection. "What about it?"

"Did it occur to you that the letter might have been about Tony and his new girlfriend, Victoria?"

Jenny blinked rapidly. "Whoa!" she said, turning to Tiffani. "You mean Jasmine might have written it?"

"Could be. Don't you think so?" Tiffani replied.

"I'll bet she did!" Jenny said excitedly. "I can't believe I didn't put two and two together. Good for you, Tif."

"Do you think Dr. Heart gave her good advice?" Tiffani asked.

"Pretty good," Jenny confirmed. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't get involved, too. I mean, Tony's our friend, and so is Jasmine. We ought to at least find out if she's the one who wrote the letter."

"That's what I think, too," Tiffani agreed. "Why don't we ask her? As friends?"

"All right!" Jenny agreed, getting up. "First thing Monday, at school."

"Deal!" Tiffani said, nodding.

Just as they got back out on the street, though, they saw Jasmine. She was running toward them from the direction of the beach, her hand over her mouth.

"Jasmine!" Tiffani called out to her.

"What's the matter?" Jenny asked, putting an arm around Jasmine's shoulders.

Jasmine looked from Tiffani to Jenny and shook her head. "It's nothing," she said, her large brown eyes radiating distress. "Tony just told me he doesn't want to see me anymore, that's all."

"What?" Jenny cried.

"Why?" Tiffani asked.

"He's got a new girlfriend," Jasmine said, her voice breaking. "I even wrote to Dr. Heart about it. Maybe you saw the letter?"

"Oh, *that* letter!" Jenny said innocently.

"Yes, we saw it," Tiffani said. "That was *your* letter?"

"Yes," Jasmine said. "And I just took the advice I got."

Tiffani gulped. "I guess it didn't work, huh?" she asked.

"Oh, it worked all right," Jasmine said with a sigh. "I found out where I stand with him, and now he won't have to lie to me anymore."

"That was horrible of him," Jenny said, shaking her head disgustedly. "Men. Ugh."

"But you know what?" Jasmine added with a small smile. "I feel better knowing it isn't 'cause I'm prejudiced that I was jealous."

"It isn't?" Tiffani asked.

"No. It's not just that this chick Victoria is white. She's also *rich*. I saw her and Tony driving by in her Porsche convertible. She's not from around here, either. She doesn't go to PCHS. They don't know any of the same people. They have absolutely nothing in common, they know each other all of one week, and he already wants to see her exclusively!" Jasmine sighed. "To tell you the truth, I'm worried about Tony. I'm afraid this new girl is going to break his heart."

"You still care about him, even though he lied to you?" Jenny asked in disbelief.

"Of course I do," Jasmine said quietly. "I'm not madly in love with him, the way he is with Victoria. But I really care about him and about what happens to him."

"Gee, Jasmine," Tiffani said. "Tony's lucky to have you in his life. You're a real, true friend."

"Too bad *he* doesn't see it that way," Jasmine said with a sad shake of her head.

"Don't give up on Tony, Jasmine," Tiffani urged her. "He may come around yet."

"I'll be here for him whenever he needs my friendship," Jasmine told them. "I just hope everything works out for him."

Waving good-bye, Jasmine went off down the street as Jenny and Tiffani stared after her.

"She's great," Jenny commented. "Tony's a fool to let her go."

"Well, maybe Victoria really is the girl for him," Tiffani said hopefully.

"Do you honestly think so?" Jenny asked skeptically.

Tiffani bit her lip and looked at Jenny. "No. Do you?"

Jenny shook her head. "Nope. I have the feeling that one of these days it's going to be Tony Wicks writing in to Dr. Heart. Remember, you heard it here first."

• • •

On Monday, Matt finished lunch early and headed up to the top floor of PCHS. He'd been wondering for three whole days whether Randi Jo had read his letter and what she thought of it.

Dr. Heart's advice kept ringing in his ears: *Hang in there, and don't get down on yourself. . . . Above all, don't get discouraged. All things come to those who wait.*

But he couldn't wait. Not a minute longer. He had to know how Randi Jo felt. He just had to!

He was going to go into the *Clarion* office and ask Randi Jo point-blank about the letter. If she hated it, then, like Tiffani had said, maybe she wasn't really the girl for him. At least he'd know. All this uncertainty was driving him crazy!

He marched down the hall to the *Clarion* office door and grabbed the handle.

But he never turned the knob. What he saw through the door's glass window froze him to the spot.

There was Randi Jo, sitting at her desk, looking at the computer screen in front of her with a radiant smile on her beautiful face.

And standing over her, with his hands on her shoulders, was the guy she'd been with at Sharkey's.

The guy named Bill.

Chapter 7

"Oh, Tony," Victoria breathed, leaning her head on his shoulder as they walked down the beach early Monday evening. "Isn't the sunset beautiful?"

"It sure is," Tony agreed. "And you know what's even more beautiful?"

"What?" asked Victoria, with that little giggle that Tony couldn't resist.

"The fact that I didn't have to work at Sharkey's today." He grinned at her and pointed his finger. "Gotcha. You thought I was going to say it was you, right?"

She pretended to be insulted. "Well, the thought did cross my mind," she admitted, the corner of her mouth curling into a smile.

"You're beautiful all the time, not just tonight,"

Tony told her. He bent over and gave her a long, slow, tender kiss. Then he sighed with satisfaction. "Whoa, mama! Where'd you learn to kiss like that?"

"Never mind, Mr. Curious," she told him. "Anyhow, I've told you all about the guys I've gone out with. But you haven't said a word about the girls whose hearts you've broken."

Tony felt a sudden pang of regret go through him. He winced at the thought of Jasmine. It had only been two days since he'd told her, on this very spot, that he wanted to stop seeing her.

"Uh-oh. Did I say something wrong?" Victoria wanted to know.

"No, darlin'," Tony assured her. "It's just that I only recently broke up with this lady I've been seeing."

"Recently? How recently?"

"Like two days ago." Tony searched her eyes to see how she would react. At first, they showed concern, but then they relaxed again.

"You mean you broke up with her because of me?" she asked, sounding flattered.

"That's right," Tony said. "I just don't feel like I want to see anybody else right now. Not while I'm seeing you. Of course," he hurried to add, "that doesn't mean you can't see whoever you want—if you want to."

"That's sweet of you, Tony," Victoria told him. "But I feel the same way about you. Maybe you're Mr.

Right, and maybe you're not. But one thing's for sure, you're Mr. Right Now."

"Seal that with a kiss, baby," Tony told her, and leaned over her again.

"Tell me about her," Victoria said, turning her face away and starting to walk again. "What's her name?"

"Jasmine," Tony said, and proceeded to tell Victoria what had happened last Tuesday night at the movie theater.

"Poor Tony!" Victoria said when he'd finished. "That must have been so hard for you."

"It wasn't easy," Tony agreed.

"Hey," Victoria said suddenly, a gleam coming into her eyes. "Come with me. I want to take you somewhere."

"Where?" Tony asked, running after her as she took off toward the street, where her car was parked.

"It's a surprise," she told him. They found her car and drove south along the ocean until they reached the Palos Verdes peninsula, that huge mountain of rock jutting into the Pacific south of Redondo Beach, covered with tall trees and luxurious homes.

"I'm taking you home," she announced as they drove into a section marked Palos Verdes Estates. "To meet Mommy and Daddy."

"Whoa!" Tony said, bolting upright in panic. "Right now? Oh, baby, I don't know—I should wear something fancier, right? I mean, I've got sand between my toes and everything—"

"No excuses," Victoria insisted, turning into a long, tree-lined driveway. "Don't worry, they'll love you. They're always telling me to get out and meet new people, and not just stick to my own little crowd."

Tony shifted uncomfortably as the car approached a palatial, sprawling, white stucco house surrounded by a huge lawn. Behind the house, Tony saw a pool and a tennis court. "This is where you live, huh?" he asked, totally floored.

"Yup," she replied, putting an arm through his and leading him up the marble stairs to the front door. "Come on inside and meet the folks. Mommy and Daddy are home tonight, packing. They're off to Europe tomorrow."

"Well, they'll be too busy to want to meet me, then," Tony said, trying to find a way out.

"Don't be ridiculous! What's more important—a stupid little trip or me?" She batted her beautiful eyelashes at him, and he nodded mutely, swallowing his fear.

What if her parents didn't like him? What if they didn't want their daughter dating a black boy? He would have bet that Victoria had never brought home a black boyfriend before.

But as it turned out, he needn't have worried. Mr. and Mrs. Wellington were busy and didn't have much time to talk, but Tony was sure of one thing—

they had nothing against him, either personally or because of his color. They were totally friendly and warm, just like their beautiful daughter.

Victoria didn't waste any time watching them pack, either. "Come on out back," she told Tony. "I'll show you the grounds."

He followed her outside, where the first stars were coming out in the evening sky. First she showed him the huge, kidney-shaped pool, then the spa, and then the stable where her family's horses were kept by their hired groom. "Want to go for a ride?" she asked Tony. "There are lights on the paths, and we've got five acres."

"Uh, not right now, thanks," Tony said. He didn't want to admit to her that he didn't know the first thing about riding a horse. In fact, the last time he'd been on anything with four legs was when his dad took him on the merry-go-round when he was six!

"How about hitting a few tennis balls around?" she asked him.

"Isn't it kind of dark out?" he asked.

She laughed, hit a switch, and suddenly the tennis court was bathed in floodlights. "Voilà," she said. "Ready for love?"

"Love?" Tony repeated. "Oh, I get it. Love! Yeah, sure!"

She tossed him a racket, and they played for a few minutes. Tony was a pretty good athlete, although

tennis was not his game. In fact, he could count on one hand all the times he'd played in his life. Still, he was almost able to keep up with her.

"You could use a few lessons," she told him as they walked off the court. "But you're a natural athlete. I'll bet you're a good dancer, too." Suddenly her eyes lit up, and she snapped her fingers. "Hey, that gives me an idea. Come on."

Tony was used to this by now—Victoria's habit of leading him to some new and exciting place without telling him where they were going. He didn't know how much he liked it, though. Most of the places they went were pretty cool, but he kept feeling like he didn't fit in at any of them.

"Where to now?" he asked as they got back into her car. When she only giggled in response, he added, "I figured. Another surprise, right?"

"I'm full of surprises," Victoria assured him, with a mischievous look in her eyes. "But don't worry. It's all part of getting to know each other better, isn't it?"

"Lead on, baby," Tony said, giving her a smile. "I'm ready for anything."

In less than five minutes, Victoria pulled onto a side street and parked in front of a large house—it wasn't an estate like hers, but it was still pretty enormous. From the street they could hear music throbbing out from the windows. Inside, people were dancing.

"Party time—I'm down on that!" he said excitedly. Now, *this* was something he could really get behind—dancing with his new lady and impressing her friends with his unique Tony Wicks patented moves!

But the minute they walked inside, he could feel a distinct chill coming from all directions. Victoria took him around the house, introducing him to everyone there.

"Boy, you sure have a lot of friends," Tony commented.

The only trouble was, Victoria's friends weren't very friendly. Not only that, every single one of them was dressed to the nines. Tony felt totally out of it in his beach shorts and T-shirt.

When Victoria finally let go of him for a minute, to go to the bathroom and put on some lip gloss, Tony looked around. Every time he shifted his gaze, people quickly glanced away. He could tell they'd been staring at him and talking about him.

Was it because he wasn't dressed for this party? Or was it because he was black and he was here with a white girl? Not just a white girl, but a rich, popular white girl. It didn't help that Victoria had been showing him off like some kind of trophy that she'd brought back from the wilds of Redondo Beach. He wished she'd warned him it was going to be like this. Suddenly he was sick of being surprised.

"Tony, is it?" A guy came up to him wearing a

blazer, hundred-dollar jeans, and fancy cowboy boots. "I'm Armand. Used to go out with Vicky."

"She doesn't like to be called Vicky," Tony said, trying to do the guy a favor. "She told me."

"She liked it fine when I was dating her."

"Are you the one whose mother won the Nobel Prize?" Tony asked.

"No, that's Edward. He's over there, dancing with Mitsuko Hamara, the Japanese consul's daughter." Armand gave Tony a sly smile. Tony thought he could sense a subtle put-down in the guy's tone, but he wasn't sure. Maybe he was just being too sensitive. After all, the guy had come over to talk to him.

"I'm the tennis player," Armand continued.

"Oh, yeah, the one who played in the tournament and got written up in the paper. You're ranked in the top ten for your age group aren't you?"

"Top five, but who's keeping track?" Armand said. "Do you play?"

"No, I'm a musician."

"That's a coincidence. So am I," Armand said. "I'm in the all-state orchestra—cello soloist. What instrument do you play?"

"Drums," Tony told him. "But I don't do classical. I'm in a rock band. That's my thing."

"Your 'thing.' I see." Armand looked at him as if Tony had just told him he came from Mars. "Well, it was nice talking to you," he said, and walked away, just like that.

Victoria seemed to have gotten lost on the way to the bathroom or something. Tony tried to strike up some more conversations, but everybody he talked to was just like Armand—snobby. How could Victoria stand to hang out with kids like these? he wondered. Well, maybe that was why she'd gone looking for somebody different. Somebody like *him*.

Victoria returned at last, and they went out onto the patio and danced. Finally Tony was in his element. Victoria was a good dancer, too, and the two of them showed off their chemistry to everybody at that party. When the first number was over, they actually got applause, and it just went on from there.

Still, he could see them whispering in each other's ears, making comments and laughing.

Checking his watch, Tony saw that it was ten-thirty. "I've got to get home," he told Victoria. "I've got an eleven o'clock curfew on school nights."

"A curfew?" Victoria repeated, her eyes opening wide as she let out a little giggle. Then she recovered herself. "Oh, Tony, that's so *cute*! A curfew!"

Tony frowned. "What's so cute about it?" he asked. "I guess you and your friends get to stay out as late as you want to, huh?"

Victoria nodded, a mischievous gleam in her eye. "We're party animals," she said happily.

"Don't your parents care if you get enough sleep?" Tony asked. Immediately, though, he regretted saying it.

Victoria's face clouded over, and she said, a bit huffily, "Our parents care as much about us as anyone else's, I'm sure." Turning, she walked out of there, with Tony following after her.

As she was driving him home, he apologized for his comment and, by way of explanation, told her how he'd felt at the party.

"Oh, Tony, I'm so sorry," Victoria said, her brow furrowing with concern. "They had no right to treat you like that. You were there as my guest, and besides, they're not any better than you are, no matter what they think. They can be so snobby sometimes, honestly. But once you get to know them better, you'll see—they're really a great bunch, underneath it all."

"I'll bet," Tony said skeptically.

"Did you know Rafael's dad is the head of Sunrise Computers? He's a billionaire! And Sabrina's mother wrote *The Killing Kind*—it's a mega-best-seller."

"Oh? I'll have to read it sometime," Tony said, shaking his head.

"Please, Tony, don't get upset. You'll fit in with those people. Just give it a chance."

Tony sighed. "I hope so, Victoria," he said. "But I'll be honest with you. I don't think so."

"You think they're prejudiced?" Victoria asked. "Because they're not. Not once in all the time I've known them have they ever said one bigoted word. Besides, Mitsuko is Japanese, and Kyori is from

Indonesia, and Armand's dad is French. We're a very multicultural crowd."

"The only black face I saw at that party was in the mirror," Tony protested.

"That's just a coincidence," Victoria told him. "There are black people in Palos Verdes Estates."

"Rich black people," Tony shot back. "Which I am not, no way."

"That's true," Victoria admitted. "To tell you the truth, I think that's why it shook them up to see you there. Not because you're black. They're just so snobby and narrow about people who don't have the kind of money that they do. I'll let you in on a little secret," she said, leaning toward him as she drove. "Part of why I brought you there was to shake them up. It's good for them!"

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "But was it good for me?"

"Oh, Tony, I'm sorry," Victoria said. "I guess I wasn't being very sensitive, was I? Can you ever forgive me?"

Tony gave her a smile as she pulled over in front of his house, which suddenly looked incredibly tiny. "Of course I can, Victoria," he said, leaning over to kiss her. "I know you wouldn't have done it if you'd realized."

"But, Tony," she said, avoiding his kiss. "Promise me one thing. Promise me you'll come with me to at least one more party with those guys. You've got to give them another chance."

"I do?"

"I know you didn't have a good time there tonight," she said, rubbing his arm and pouting. "Except when we were dancing. But look at it this way—either they'll get used to you, or they won't. But no matter what, we'll have a blast watching them squirm. What do you say?"

Tony recoiled from the mischievous look in her eyes. Her words sounded cruel to him. *Wait,* he told himself. *This is Victoria. No way would she use me on purpose just to taunt her friends.*

Or would she? Suddenly Tony felt uneasy. Did he really know her as well as he thought he did? After all, they'd only met thirteen days ago.

"Tony? Did I say something wrong?" she asked, suddenly looking worried.

He smelled her perfume as she leaned toward him so their lips could meet. In that moment, all doubts disappeared.

Chapter 8

"Yes, I'm sure. I saw them together. It was the same guy, and he had his hands on her shoulders." Matt looked at Tiffani across the table where they were sitting at Sharkey's Tuesday afternoon, and shook his head. "So much for me and Randi Jo."

Tiffani didn't know what to say. She felt awful. Worse, she felt responsible. If she hadn't advised Matt to write that letter, he wouldn't have gone up to the *Clarion* office and seen Randi Jo with that other guy! Her first two letters and already two hearts had been broken. She'd wanted to help people get together, not break up!

"I feel so bad for you, Matt," Tiffani said. "But are you sure they were being romantic together? I

mean, Randi Jo really liked you. I can't believe she's fallen for another guy so fast."

"All I can say is, I'm convinced. If you're not, why don't you ask Randi Jo about it?" With that, Matt gathered up his books and put some money down on the table. "See you later, at practice," he said, and walked out of Sharkey's.

Tiffani watched him go. *Well, why* don't *I ask her?* she asked herself. *After all, I've already gotten involved in somebody else's business. I may as well get involved all the way!*

She didn't have far to look, because Randi Jo came into Sharkey's just then. Tiffani wondered if she'd seen Matt going out. If she had, it certainly hadn't affected her good mood.

"Tiffani!" she called out, waving another thick brown envelope. Randi Jo came over and sat in the very seat where Matt had been sitting. "Check this out. Fifteen more letters! Can you believe it? Dr. Heart is the biggest thing to hit *The Clarion* since the 'Personals' column!"

"Far out," Tiffani said, trying to sound excited. "Um, Randi Jo?"

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering," Tiffani said, edging her way into it. "What did you think of the letters we ran last issue?"

"I thought they were perfect," Randi Jo replied.

"Didn't you? I mean, that's why you picked them, isn't it?"

"Sure," Tiffani said. "But did any of them particularly get to you?"

Randi Jo gave her a piercing look. "Are you trying to say something, Tiffani?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Tiffani said. "It's just that, well, I heard a rumor that you were seeing somebody new. Is it true?"

"Somebody new?" Randi Jo repeated. "Where did you hear that?"

Tiffani shrugged. "Oh, around," she said. "Is it true?"

"No," Randi Jo said with a little laugh. "I can't imagine how a rumor like that got started. Weird."

"Oh." Tiffani blinked. Randi Jo's denial certainly seemed genuine. But then what about that guy Matt had seen her with?

"Anything else you want to know?" Randi Jo wondered.

"Um, I guess not," Tiffani said, getting up to go. "See you, Randi Jo."

You chickened out, Tiffani, she chided herself as she walked out the door. *Why didn't you ask her about Bill?*

But it was too late now. She only hoped Randi Jo had been telling her the truth.

• • •

Sly Winkle sat on a padded stool in the Garrisons' garage, listening to Matt pound out his latest tune. Matt normally played the guitar, but when he wrote a song, he did it on the keyboards.

"Wow! That's definitely a hit," Sly said when Matt had finished. "When did you write it?"

"Last night," Matt said. "I couldn't sleep."

"I figured. I mean, that's what it says in the lyrics, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Right." Matt gave him a shy grin.

"I'll tell you, buddy," Sly said, slipping off the stool and going over to Matt, "you've been pretty productive in the last few days. What is it, five new songs?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "I haven't counted. But I do know I've been at the keyboards a lot. It makes me feel better to play and to write songs."

"Sure, why not?" Sly asked encouragingly. "Keep it up, big guy. If everybody else in the Dreams felt the way you do, we'd have a world-class band here."

"I wouldn't wish the way I feel on anybody," Matt said, shaking his head.

Sly shrugged and returned to his stool as Tony came in, lost in thought.

"Hey, man," he said absentmindedly to Sly. "What's up?"

"You're late, that's what's up," Sly told him. "In fact, your mind still isn't here."

"Oh, yeah, that," Tony said, coming to attention. He looked around for a minute, then said, "Look, while I've got you two dudes here, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Man to man?" Sly asked, curious.

Tony looked him up and down. "I guess you could say that," he said with a little smile. "I need a little advice about Victoria."

"I'll be happy to tell you what I think," Sly said. "She's using you. You ought to dump her."

Tony's expression darkened. "Why? So you can move in on her?" he shot back.

Sly recoiled. He would have been hurt if he'd taken Tony seriously. But Sly knew his pal was lovestruck. Hey, he'd been lovestruck himself—over Jenny. In fact, if Jenny told him right now that she'd go out with him, Sly would drop everything and follow her anywhere.

"Tony, when a guy loses it for a girl, he doesn't see her faults anymore. Take me, for instance. I'm sure Jenny has lots of faults, but can I see them? No."

Matt laughed and shook his head. "Sly, Tony's serious, okay? Why don't you listen to what he's trying to say?"

"Yeah, man, chill," Tony put in. "Here it is. I think I'm in love. I even told Jasmine I didn't want to go out with her anymore because I want to concen-

trate on Victoria. But something just doesn't feel right. I don't know if it's because I'm black and she's white or if it's something else. What do you guys think? Am I crazy?"

"The answer is self-evident," Sly said quickly. "I mean, look at yourself. You're way, way off the deep end!"

"Sly," Matt warned. "Listen, Tony, my advice is to go with your feelings, but keep your eyes open. I know from experience how a guy can get hurt."

"But," Sly broke in, "you don't need to get hurt if you can get her to fall harder for you than you have for her. Believe me, Tony, my man, I've dated all kinds of women—black, white, and chartreuse. They're all the same. Flattery renders them completely powerless."

"Get off it, Sylvester," Tony said. "It didn't get you anywhere with Victoria."

"Rub it in, why don't you," Sly said, wincing.

"Tony, you're right," Matt said. "What Sly's saying is baloney. But he's right about one thing—color doesn't matter. It's whether you share the same hopes and dreams that's important, whether you have interests in common and can see things eye to eye."

"Do I hear song number six in the making?" Sly asked sarcastically.

"Aw, shut up, Sylvester," Tony said. "My man Matt is speaking the truth here."

"That was the problem between me and Randi

Jo," Matt explained. "I didn't show enough interest in the things that mattered to her, and she wasn't all that interested in my music, either. I'm all broken up about it, but that's the way it is. Now she's found somebody who's got more in common with her. Someday, so will I."

"Who? Who'd she find?" Sly wanted to know.

"He means that guy named Bill. Right, Matt?" Tony asked.

"Uh-huh," Matt answered. "Anyway, Tony, it all depends how you feel about the girl. Don't let anybody tell you it isn't right between you, just because you're black and she's white."

"But that's just it—nobody's told me that," Tony confessed. "Nobody."

"So what's the problem?" Matt asked.

"It's just that I keep getting this nagging feeling that something isn't right. I don't know what it is, and I don't know why I feel it. It's just that sometimes she acts kind of strange for a minute, and then she's the same beautiful Victoria again. I keep wondering if there's something she's not telling me."

"There is," Sly said. "There is something she's not telling you. That you've lost your mind. But *I'll* tell you. After all, that's what friends are for. Tony, you've lost your mind."

"Thanks a lot, Sylvester," Tony said, trying to laugh. "With friends like you . . ."

"Aw, don't mention it," Sly said as Tony walked

to the door. "Hey, where are you going? I thought we were going to practice!"

"I can't today," Tony said, stopping. "That's what I came here to tell you. Victoria has tickets to the opera."

"The *opera*?" Sly reached his hands upward. "Did I get that right?"

"Yeah, man," Tony told him. "She's exposing me to a lot of new stuff."

"Great." Sly rolled his eyes. "The opera, he says. Well, enjoy the arias while the band practices without a drummer! Nice of you to let us know." Shaking his head, he added, "How about tomorrow, lover boy? It's a school holiday, in case you forgot. If I schedule us a practice for four o'clock, do you think you could honor us with your presence?"

"I'm supposed to work at Sharkey's," Tony told him apologetically. But then his face brightened. "But, hey, maybe I can get Heather to cover for me! In fact, I know for sure she needs the money. Count me in, dudes! I'll be here. Hey, I've got a def idea. I'll bring Victoria along, too!" With a wave and a humongous smile, Tony left the garage.

"He is really gaga," Sly said to Matt when they were alone.

"I'll say," Matt agreed. "Lucky guy."

"Lucky? Are you kidding? We've got to do something about this right away, before he forgets he's in a band altogether!"

"Like what?" Matt asked.

Just then Jenny came bounding through the door. "Sorry I'm late, guys," she said. "Where's Tiffani? Where's Tony?"

"I'm right here," came Tiffani's voice from behind her. "And I just passed Tony out on the street. He didn't even see me till I said hello. Is something the matter with him?"

Sly explained as they set up to play. But without Tony on the drums, it wasn't much of a practice. The best part was hearing Matt's new songs.

"Great," Sly said. "When I get us the UCLA frat gig, we can play all our new tunes. If Tony ever shows up to learn them, that is."

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When practice was over, Sly and Matt took a walk on the beach together. "Listen, about Tony," Sly said as they went along. "Like I was saying before the girls showed up, we've got to do something."

"Well," Matt said, "if you ask me, the best thing to do is just let love take its course. We really shouldn't interfere. I mean, if it's right, it'll work out, and if it isn't, it won't."

"You sound like Dr. Heart," Sly commented dryly.

"Actually, it was Tiffani who said that to me," Matt told him.

But Sly was only half listening. He couldn't help

thinking that there had to be a way to bring Tony back to his senses. There had to be a way to make him see the truth. . . .

Then, right in front of him, Sly saw the way.

Jasmine was sitting on a bench facing the beach, reading a book, alone and gorgeous. Seeing her gave Sly an idea—a very interesting idea. . . .

Chapter 9

Dear Dr. Heart:

I have to admit, I never thought I'd be writing to you like this. I always thought I could work things out for myself, and up till now, I was right. But this time, I need help—bad.

I've got this thing going with a chillin' babe, and I really dig her, but I'm kind of worried. She seems pretty gone over me, too, but sometimes she does things that don't fit in. It's like there's this other side of her I can't see, and I don't know what it is.

We've known each other two weeks, and it's been crazy all that time. She's from a different crowd, and her people are different from mine. Like, richer. And snobbier. I feel like the brother from another planet when I'm driving in her fancy car.

I'M CRAZY ABOUT THIS CHICK, BUT IT'S POSSIBLE WE'RE NOT RIGHT FOR EACH OTHER. HOW DO I FIND OUT? HOW CAN I BE SURE SHE'S SINCERE, THAT SHE'S NOT USING ME OR SOMETHING?

I HOPE YOU CAN HELP, DR. HEART.

SIGNED,
CONFUSED

Tiffani set down the letter and put on her sandals to go to practice with the Dreams. She'd read it three times since she'd gotten it Monday afternoon, and she was sure it was from Tony. He sounded exactly the same in his letter as he did in real life.

But what was she supposed to say to him? How could she help Tony decide about Victoria?

Tiffani had only met Victoria once, at band practice, and she thought she seemed pretty nice. The trouble was, Tiffani knew she always thought *everyone* was nice when she first met them. She was *born* giving people the benefit of the doubt!

Tiffani thought again about Jenny as she headed for her best friend's house for practice. Jenny was much more levelheaded. She saw right through people. Randi Jo could easily have chosen Jenny to be Dr. Heart. But she'd chosen Tiffani. Obviously, Randi Jo preferred Tiffani's sunny outlook to Jenny's darker one.

Trust yourself, Tiffani said to herself as she

drove down the palm-lined streets. *You'll figure out what to say.*

Jenny was waiting for her when she arrived. "I've made a decision," she told Tiffani as they headed to the garage. "If you can't share your secret with me, whatever it is, it means you don't trust me. And without trust there is no friendship."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jenny!" Tiffani cried, following her in. "Of course I trust you. These are just very special circumstances. You have to believe me!"

"Sure, I believe you," Jenny said hotly. "That's why I've decided we have nothing to say to each other. Let's just play our music and sing. I'm not going to take it out on the Dreams just because you decided to shut me out."

"Jenny!" Tiffani pleaded, but it was no use. Jenny turned her back on her and marched behind her keyboards.

Matt had watched the whole exchange. "What's going on between you two?" he asked, blinking in surprise.

"Nothing," Jenny muttered, not looking at him. "Absolutely nothing."

Tiffani bit her lip and frowned. "Jenny's mad because I'm keeping a secret from her."

"Well, that doesn't exactly seem like the end of the world," Matt said. "You two seem like you need a little perspective. There are people with much worse problems, you know?"

"Like you, for instance?" Jenny said. "If you're suggesting I write to *The Clarion* like you did, forget it. It's not worth it." Jenny shot an annoyed look Tiffani's way.

"I was thinking abut Tony, actually," Matt corrected her. "I'm worried about him."

"Me, too," Tiffani agreed. "What do you think he should do?"

"Beats me, Tif," Matt said. "But Sly says Victoria's just using Tony to shock her rich friends. He thinks she's going to dump him as soon as she gets tired of him."

"What makes him think that?" Tiffani asked, testing the waters. "She seems nice enough to me."

At that, Jenny rolled her eyes and shook her head, a tiny smile on her face. "You're hopeless, Tiffani," she murmured.

"Sly said he talked to Victoria, and that she said some pretty nasty things," Matt explained. "She told him that what happened between her and Tony was their business, not Sly's."

"Good for her," Jenny said, nodding admiringly. "Sly had it coming to him."

"Maybe," Matt agreed. "But Tony doesn't. And if Sly's right, Tony's about to get dumped. I know what *that* feels like, and I don't want it to happen to my friend."

Tiffani wanted to hear more, but just then, Sly opened the door with a newspaper in his hands and a

huge grin on his face. "Your heartfelt gratitude is graciously accepted," he announced, taking a bow. "Yes, once again, the amazing Sly Winkle has brought his protégés to prominence with the deal of a lifetime."

"What in the world are you talking about, Sylvester?" Jenny asked him, confused.

"Yeah, Sly," Matt added. "Why don't you just tell us why you're acting so weird."

"Very well," Sly said, bopping over to them. "If you insist. I understand, the suspense is killing you."

"Get on with it," Jenny prodded him.

"Ah, Jennifer, my love, don't rush me," Sly warned her, raising a finger. "This is a moment to be savored."

"Well?" Tiffani asked excitedly.

"Well—we got the gig!" Sly shouted, doing a little dance. "The lead singer of the band they'd booked came down with mononucleosis—and *we* are now the featured band at next weekend's big UCLA fraternity dance! We play in front of seven hundred college kids, for two hundred dollars—our highest paying job yet!"

"All right!" Matt said, giving Sly a high five.

"Woo-hoo!" Jenny shouted, forgetting herself long enough to give Sly a big hug.

"I could get used to this," Sly told her, hugging her back. "Come on, plant a big wet one right here," he added, pointing to his lips.

"Ick. Gross!" Jenny freed herself, but the smile remained plastered across her face.

"Sly, that's fantastic!" Tiffani said, giving him a hug, too. "Wait till we tell Tony. He's gonna flip out!"

"Speaking of which, where is Tony?" Sly asked. "Late again? This is getting to be a habit."

"He's probably with Victoria," Jenny said. "Isn't he always these days?"

"I was just telling the girls what you said, Sly," Matt told him. "About how Tony's going to get his heart broken."

"There's no doubt in my mind," Sly said. "But, hey, Matt, you just reminded me! Speaking of broken hearts—check this out for a colossal mistake. Since we had the day off from school, I used the opportunity to go down to the UCLA campus—and look whose picture I found on the front page of their student paper!" He held out the paper to Matt, and they all gathered around to look.

"It's Bill!" Matt exclaimed. Then he read the caption below the photo. " 'Bill Matos, senior student editor of the *UCLA Student Press*, receives journalism award for assisting high school editors with their work. . . .' I don't believe this."

"Hey!" Tiffani said. "He must be the editor who gave Randi Jo the idea for the 'Advice to the Lovelorn' column!"

"Which means he might not be her boyfriend at

all!" Matt said, thunderstruck. "Maybe I was wrong about the whole thing!"

"My point exactly," Sly said. Turning to the others, he added, "No applause, please. Just throw money. I accept all denominations."

"Thanks, buddy," Matt said to Sly. "You just took a big load off my mind. I just feel bad about one thing—that I didn't have the guts to ask Randi Jo about this guy myself."

"Matt, I hate to say this," Jenny broke in. "But just because he's the editor she was consulting with doesn't mean he isn't also her boyfriend. I mean, he is a pretty cool-looking guy."

"Well, he's not her boyfriend," Tiffani said firmly. "She told me she wasn't seeing anyone, and I believe her."

"You believe anything anybody tells you, Tiffani," Jenny said angrily. "I mean, you are as nauseatingly positive as Dr. Heart!"

"Oh, yeah?" Tiffani shot back, her lip trembling and her fists clenched. "Well, it so happens that I *am* Dr. Heart! So there!"

Everyone froze and stared at her. Oh, no! Her secret was out! She had blurted it out in a moment of weakness, and now it was too late to take it back!

"You?" Matt gasped.

"*That* was the secret you couldn't tell me?" Jenny asked, amazed.

Tiffani nodded. "Randi Jo made me promise not to tell anyone. Even you, Jenny."

"Oh, Tif, I'm so sorry," Jenny said, her eyes filling with tears as she reached out to give Tiffani a hug. "I should have trusted you more."

"That's what I told you!" Tiffani agreed, hugging her back.

"I guess I owe you a double thank-you," Matt said. "Tiffani, you really helped me out with Randi Jo. You're a great Dr. Heart!"

"Gee, thanks, Matt," Tiffani said, flushing.

"Oh, gag me with a spoon," Sly said, rolling his eyes. "All this family warmth and fellow feeling is giving me hives. I mean, now that everybody's happy, can we puh-leez concentrate on what's really important here? People, we've got the biggest gig of our lives coming up! Let's get busy!"

"Wait a second," Tiffani broke in. "We're forgetting somebody. Tony isn't happy."

"What are you talking about?" Jenny asked. "Have you seen him lately? He's totally moonstruck. I've never seen the guy so crazy about a girl."

"Oh, yeah? Read this," Tiffani said, and handed Tony's letter to the rest of them. "Now that you know I'm Dr. Heart, you might as well help me out. I don't know what to say to him."

"Are you *sure* Tony wrote this?" Matt asked doubtfully.

"It sure sounds like him," Jenny said. " 'Confused,' huh?"

"I see my words of warning did not fall on totally deaf ears," Sly remarked. "There's still a little of the old Tony left, thank goodness. At least he's not a total pod person yet."

"We've got to help him," Tiffani said. "But how?"

"If only we knew Victoria better," Jenny said. "If we knew more about her, we might have a better idea of what she's really about."

"We shouldn't judge her just by appearances," Tiffani added.

"Well, short of going out with her myself—which I would love to do, by the way," Sly said, "I don't see how we can find out the truth."

"I have an idea!" Jenny said, her eyes sparkling. "Tiffani and I could try to get to know her. What do you think, Tif? We could try to make friends and draw her out a little bit. You know, get her to talk about Tony."

"It sounds kind of like spying to me," Tiffani said warily.

"Not 'kind of,' Tiffani," Sly corrected her. "Spying is exactly what it is. And it's a fantastic idea, Jennifer. In fact, I wish I'd thought of it myself."

"I don't really see any harm in it," Matt said. "After all, you're just trying to help Tony out, right?"

"Well, if you all say so," Tiffani said with a sigh. "But where do you think we should take her, Jen?"

"We'll take her where all true females reveal their innermost secrets," Jenny replied, the gleam in her eyes growing brighter. "The mall!"

Chapter 10

"What's this about the mall?" Tony called out as he came in with Victoria by his side. She was holding his hand, as usual, making it kind of hard to navigate through the side door of the garage. But, hey, if she wanted to hold his hand, that was fine with Tony.

What wasn't fine was this new thing she'd been laying on him—body decoration. Some of Victoria's friends had gotten their ears pierced two or three times, but Victoria had decided to go them one better. She now had six holes all on the same ear!

Fine, Tony thought. Okay. But when she'd asked him to get her name tattooed on his arm, he'd drawn the line right there.

"Why not?" she'd asked playfully. "Aren't we

going to be together forever? Don't you care about me enough to shout it out loud?"

"No, baby, it's not that at all," he'd replied. "It's just that pain is not my thing, know what I mean? Not that I'm scared or anything. But needles? That's a whole lot of needles!"

Victoria had giggled and let it drop, at least for the time being. Tony was hoping this new idea would pass as quickly as it had come. Because there was no way he was going to get tattooed. Not for *any* girl.

"So what's this about the mall?" he repeated as they entered the garage. "I thought we were here to lay down a little magic!"

"Hey, we are, amigo," Sly said, slapping him on the back. "We are, now that you've finally arrived." He told Tony and Victoria about the UCLA gig.

"Fresh!" Tony yelled. "Hey, Victoria, you're gonna be backstage the whole time, okay? You can see the whole thing close up."

"Listen, why don't we get started?" Sly suggested, and they all took their positions and started jamming.

Tony really got into the music, smashing his drums like crazy and really grooving on the solos. He sang his heart out, too. He felt lost in the music, floating above all his problems, all the questions that had been nagging at him. The time flew by. . . .

• • •

On their first break, Jenny and Tiffani took Victoria aside. "Isn't Tony a fantastic drummer?" Tiffani bubbled. "I couldn't believe that last riff he laid down!"

"He's amazing," Victoria agreed.

"And a great guy, too," Jenny added.

"I'll say," Victoria said, looking suspiciously from one of them to the other. "Listen, is there some reason you guys are being so friendly all of a sudden?"

Tiffani glanced at Jenny, feeling suddenly guilty. Jenny jumped right in, though, and saved the day.

"You know, it's true, Victoria," she said humbly. "We didn't talk to you much the other time you were here. We were just surprised to see you. Tony hadn't mentioned anything about you."

"I understand," Victoria said, nodding her head slowly. "And now . . . ?"

"We figure since you and Tony are an item, we'd like to get to know you better," Jenny said. "Oh, and I love your earrings, by the way. *All* of them."

"Thanks," Victoria said casually, flicking the earrings so that they jangled. "It's the newest thing. All the kids at Ashford Academy are doing it."

"Really?" Tiffani asked. "Wow."

"That gives me a great idea," Jenny said in a bubbly tone of voice. "Tiffani and I are going to the mall tomorrow afternoon to check out some hot new

outfits for the gig. Why don't you come with us? We can look at earrings, too."

"Okay," Victoria said, giving them a careful smile and looking suspiciously at them again. "Count me in."

"Meet us here at five," Jenny suggested as the band went back to their positions to play another song. As they walked away, Jenny leaned over to Tiffani and whispered, "She doesn't trust us."

"She doesn't?" Tiffani whispered back.

"No, but don't worry. We just have to keep working on her. . . ."

• • •

"I don't like this, Jenny. It feels sneaky." Tiffani and Jenny were in the Garrisons' kitchen, eating grapes, waiting for Victoria to show up.

"It *is* sneaky, Tiffani," Jenny agreed. "And if we're wrong about Victoria, we'll confess, and apologize, and make friends with her for real, okay?"

"You don't believe that's going to happen, though, do you? You agree with Sly. That she's using Tony." Tiffani searched her friend's eyes.

"Tiffani, you always talk about giving people the benefit of the doubt. Do *you* think Victoria's seriously in love with Tony?"

"It's possible," Tiffani said. "He is a great guy, after all. And talented and good-looking."

"And a far cry from being a rich, worldly, upper-

class sophisticate," Jenny added. "Tiffani, this girl is rolling in it. So are all her friends."

"So? Maybe she's tired of all that," Tiffani suggested. "Maybe she wants somebody who's real."

"Maybe," Jenny returned. "And maybe Tony's just her guy of the month. Maybe when she's tired of him, she'll ditch him and break his heart."

"Jenny, I think we should let Tony deal with his own problems," Tiffani said.

"Oh, really? You mean, you don't believe in helping people who are Torn, Confused, and Lovesick, Dr. Heart?" Jenny was looking at her with raised eyebrows.

"I guess you're right," Tiffani admitted.

"Besides, if you could hide from me that you were Dr. Heart, you can certainly hide our little snooping escapade from Victoria," Jenny added.

"Okay, okay," Tiffani replied with irritation as the doorbell rang. "But I still don't like it."

An hour later, they were prowling the promenade together at Ocean View Mall, the awesome new shopping center that had just opened in the area.

"There's this great store, called Hoopz," Tiffani told Victoria. "We've gotten some totally excellent bathing suits there."

"Hoopz? Isn't that a discount place?" Victoria asked, making a face.

"Well, yes," Tiffani acknowledged. "Have you ever been there?"

"No," Victoria said. "I'm sure it's great if you say so. But I'd like to go upstairs and check out Golden Triangle. How does that sound?"

"Sure!" Jenny replied, before Tiffani could say anything.

Golden Triangle? That had to be the most expensive store in the whole mall! Tiffani had once looked in the window display and seen a pair of earrings there for three hundred dollars—and they didn't even have any jewels in them!

"Their designs are the best," Victoria said as they rode the escalator up to the top level. "I saw a shawl there that would look positively fab on you, Jenny."

"Really?" Jenny asked, sounding friendly enough. "I can't wait to see it!"

They went into Golden Triangle, through a golden, triangular doorway. Inside, Tiffani picked up a purple belt and read the price tag—seventy-two dollars! No way could she or Jenny afford anything in this store.

"I'm definitely getting this belt!" Victoria declared, holding up a dark red one for them to see. "Check this buckle out—it lights up in the dark! Incredible!"

"Wow!" Tiffani said, and looked at the price tag. The belt cost one hundred twenty dollars.

Victoria picked out a pair of earrings and a headband, then plunked down her platinum credit card at the cashier's desk. "Aren't you guys buying

anything?" she asked Jenny and Tiffani. "They have some things that would look great for your big gig at UCLA, you know."

"Well," Jenny said, "I don't know if you've caught on, Victoria, but Tiffani and I are not megamillionaires."

"Huh?" Victoria looked puzzled. "But this store isn't that expensive. You should see some of the boutiques near where I live. Talk about expensive!"

"Still," Tiffani said, "I can't buy anything here. I've got to save some of my money for college, so I don't have that much left over to spend. . . ."

"Hey, wait," Victoria said. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I guess I'm just so used to being around kids with money that I just sort of assumed . . ."

"Tony doesn't have a lot of money, either," Jenny said pointedly.

"I know," Victoria said, flushing a little. "But it's okay. In fact, it's one of the things I like best about seeing him."

She giggled—a little, secret laugh. "I always pay, anyway," she confessed. "It's so cool, being the one with the wallet. I mean, I guarantee you Tony has never been in any of the places I've taken him. Never!" Again she laughed at the thought.

"I guess paying for Tony makes you feel powerful," Jenny said. "I can understand that—for too long we women have sat there at restaurant tables while waiters put the checks in front of the guys."

"There you go," Victoria agreed.

"But did you ever think how Tony must feel about it?" Jenny asked. "There he is, getting paid for everywhere he goes. Being in places he could never afford."

"I'm sure he feels lucky to be there," Victoria said, picking up her shopping bag and leading them out of the store. "I would if I were him. I'd feel privileged to be getting an education in good taste, sampling all the finer things, moving in the exclusive circles he's moving in."

"Are you sure he *likes* moving in those circles?" Tiffani broke in. "I mean, I know he's felt pretty uncomfortable around your friends on occasion."

Victoria flashed them both a smile. "You should have seen their faces when I first brought Tony around," she said, giggling at the memory. "And when I told them Tony worked as a waiter in a beachfront burger place? They nearly *died*. It was fantastic. Now everyone is talking about him at my school. I love the fact that they're so weirded out! It serves them right. I mean, what would those stiffs do without somebody like me to shake them up every now and then?"

"Excuse me, Victoria, I don't mean to interrupt," Tiffani said as they made their way toward the food court, "but it sounds like you care more about shocking your friends than you do about Tony's feelings. Am I wrong?"

Victoria looked hurt. "Of course you're wrong!"

she insisted. "Tony's a great guy. He's gorgeous, a great drummer, a fantastic kisser, and you should see him dance! I mean, when we got on the dance floor at my friend's party, the whole floor cleared. Everybody was standing there, watching us!"

"You know, Victoria," Jenny said courageously, "I have to tell you, I get the same feeling Tiffani does. The way you talk about him, it's like Tony is your toy or something. It's like—as soon as your friends get used to him and aren't shocked anymore, you'll dump him and get somebody else even more shocking."

Victoria's face hardened. "I don't see what business this is of yours, either of you," she said, coming to a stop in the middle of the promenade. "Tony's perfectly happy going out with me, and I'm happy with him."

"Are you so sure he's happy?" Tiffani asked gently.

"Of course I'm sure," Victoria said. "What makes you think he isn't?"

"This," Tiffani said, handing Victoria a copy of the "Lovelorn" column. "That's Tony's letter," she told Victoria. "Jenny and I are *totally sure* of it."

Victoria read the letter and the response. Then she looked at Tiffani, wide-eyed. "If you're so sure this is Tony's letter, why don't you ask him?" she asked.

"We will," Jenny told her. "And I advise you to do the same."

"I can't believe this!" Victoria said in a huff.

"And I thought you brought me shopping because you wanted to be my friends!" She tightened her grip on her shopping bag and turned to walk away.

Jenny's voice stopped her. "Tell me this, Victoria," she called out. "If Tony were rich and white and privileged, would you still be dating him? Would you *ever* have dated him?"

Victoria walked slowly back until she was looking right into Jenny's face. "Of course not," she hissed. "If I wanted a guy like that, I didn't have to come all the way to Redondo Beach to find one. There are plenty of them where I come from. But Tony's *not* rich and he's *not* white, is he? No. So I'm dating him. And I'm going to keep on dating him, no matter what you say."

"Suppose we tell Tony what you just told us?" Jenny said, her jaw tight.

Victoria's response chilled Tiffani to the bone. "Go right ahead and tell him," the redheaded beauty said with a wicked smile. "He'll never believe you if I say it isn't true. You two just don't get it, do you? I've got Tony wrapped around my little finger. And I plan to keep him there as long as I like."

Chapter 11

Tony tried again to tie the knot in his tie. He'd already messed it up three times, but he wasn't used to wearing a tie, and he hadn't had much practice at this kind of thing.

Tonight he and Victoria were going to the big dance at her school. She'd driven him around the academy's campus once before, and Tony had seen enough to know that he'd better look sharp. Maybe in this rented tuxedo, he wouldn't draw so many stares from her school friends. He sure hoped not. Victoria had assured him they'd accept him sooner or later. He only hoped it was sooner. A *lot* sooner. Like—*tonight*.

Giving up on tying the knot properly, Tony pulled the tie off his neck and flopped down on his bed. He picked up the latest issue of *The Clarion* and read Dr. Heart's answer to his letter again:

Dear Confused:

It's hard to know what to write to you, because this is one problem you're going to have to solve on your own. No matter how much your friends want to help you, you're the only one who can decide if this new girl is right for you. However, I will give you some suggestions.

Find out more about her. The more you know, the better a decision you'll be able to make. Give yourself time. Don't rush things one way or the other. And while you're at it, try to examine your own heart. Why do you feel the way you feel about her? Is it just the way she looks? Or is it something more, something deeper? Why have you been feeling so unsure? Is it just because you've fallen in love so fast? Or is it because something's wrong with the whole thing?

I'm sorry I don't have any definite answers for you. But I feel sure that, given enough time and patience, you'll be able to answer them for yourself. Good luck. I'll be pulling for you. And so will all your friends.

Sincerely,
Dr. Heart

Tony considered the good advice in the letter. Why was he so attracted to Victoria, anyway? It wasn't

because they had anything in common, that was for sure.

He'd never asked himself these kinds of questions about a girl before. But then again, he'd never felt this way about anyone. Never.

And yet it *was* easy to figure out why he was so attracted to her. That hair, those eyes, those lips, that voice, those kisses . . . And of course, it didn't hurt that she was rich, had a Porsche, and paid his way wherever they went.

Or did it hurt? Maybe that was what explained Tony's uneasiness whenever she took him someplace where she felt at home. The only time he felt really at ease with her was when they were walking on the beach alone, or when she came to watch him practice with the Dreams. When she took him into her world, it was like being on another planet.

Outside, he heard the familiar honking of the Porsche's horn. Grabbing his tie and his tuxedo jacket, he raced down the stairs and out the door, yelling good-bye to his dad, who was in the living room, watching a Lakers game on TV.

"Wow, don't you look excellent!" Victoria said, checking him out as he got into the car.

"Yeah," Tony mumbled hurriedly. "I was just getting my tie on. You look pretty incredible yourself."

Victoria was wearing an off-the-shoulder peach dress that totally took his breath away.

"Thanks," she said, leaning over to kiss him. Tony felt the warm, tingling sensation he always felt when she kissed him, but now he found that he was also keeping himself aloof a little, checking her out from a distance at the same time.

"Is everything okay?" Victoria asked. "You seem uncomfortable."

"Oh, it's just the tux," he explained hurriedly. "I think I've outgrown it a little." He didn't want to tell her he'd rented it. It was stupid, he knew. Victoria didn't care if he owned a tuxedo or knew how to tie a tie.

"It's all those humongous muscles," she said admiringly, throwing the car into gear and pulling out into traffic. "I hope you're ready to do some dancing."

"Oh, I am, baby. I am."

"And don't bother with that stupid tie," she told him. "I think you should look a little wild. It reflects your true personality."

"It does?" Tony asked. "Yeah, I guess it does," he agreed with a smile.

"I can't tell you how many guys have asked me out since I've been seeing you," she confided. "It's so crazy! All the guys have been trying to impress me with how unconventional they are. Of course, they aren't. Not at all. Not like you are."

"Me? Unconventional?" Tony asked, surprised. "What makes you say that?"

"It's just that you're so different from my other friends. That's why I like you so much."

Tony smiled and nodded, but he wasn't sure he liked hearing what she'd just said. Like so many of the little remarks Victoria let drop, this one had left him feeling uneasy and unsure of himself.

Could she be using me? he wondered for the thousandth time. And if she was, did he even mind being used? Maybe he was using her as much as she was using him! Dating a beautiful, rich girl with a red Porsche convertible wasn't doing his reputation any harm, was it? Everyone at PCHS was talking about Tony and his new girlfriend. All the guys were jealous—especially Sly—and all the babes were trying to get his attention. Dating Victoria hadn't exactly been hard on his self-esteem.

The one thing he felt bad about was Jasmine. She hardly even talked to him anymore. He'd always valued her opinion on things. What was her opinion of him now? Not very high, that was for sure.

Soon they were driving through the stone gates of Ashford Academy and up the long drive through the campus to the gymnasium complex where the dance was being held. "They hired a band called Zero Hour to play the dance," Victoria told Tony. "I told the organizers about California Dreams, but they said you guys didn't have the credentials."

"That figures," Tony said.

"Maybe next time." Victoria parked the car, and they got out. "Wow, listen to that music! You can hear it all the way out here. Come on—I can't wait to get you out on the dance floor."

She took Tony by the hand and led him across the parking lot to the gym entrance, where she paid for their tickets. "Let me get this," Tony said, trying to stop her.

"Not a chance," she insisted, winking at the ticket taker. "This is my treat."

"Everything's your treat," Tony said with a sigh. "Just once, I'd like to treat you to something."

"What would be the point?" Victoria asked, as if he'd just said something ridiculous. "Come on; let's dance."

She led him out onto the dance floor. All around them, Tony could feel the eyes on him, checking him out in his tux—the one guy here who didn't go to school with all the rest of them, didn't live the kind of lifestyle they did, didn't have anything in common with them at all.

As they danced, Victoria kept waving to kids she knew—most of them guys, Tony noticed. They waved back, and one or two of them even came over and flirted with her, right there on the dance floor. Tony found himself getting more than a little hot under his freshly starched, rented collar.

There was Armand, the tennis snob, Edward, son of superbrain, and all the rest of Victoria's ex-

boyfriends. They were all rich, and handsome, and suave.

But Victoria liked *him*, Tony assured himself nervously. He tried to let go of his anxiety by putting more energy into his famous Tony Wicks dance moves.

That seemed to work, all right. Just like at that first party he'd gone to with her, everyone in the room started turning around to watch, forgetting to dance themselves.

That's it, Tony told himself. *Chemistry, baby. You and me, Victoria. Let the whole world watch.*

But when he looked at her, he noticed that she wasn't looking back at him. She was eyeing a guy he didn't recognize—a tall, athletic-looking guy in a white linen summer suit, designer shades, and long, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Who's that?" Tony asked her as they danced.

"Who?" Victoria shot back.

"That guy over there. I don't recognize him."

"Oh, him. He's new," Victoria told him, glancing at the tall guy again over her shoulder. "He's Jacques Merlot. His dad's Yves Merlot, the French tennis champion. They've just moved here."

"Oh." Hmmm, Tony thought. A new guy. Somehow the thought of there being a new guy around scared him, like it was a kind of competition he hadn't had before.

Trying to put this new worry out of his mind,

Tony threw himself back into dancing, with even wilder abandon, and Victoria responded. The crowd around them kept growing larger, and the band even started getting into the scene on the dance floor. Pretty soon everyone was clapping along to the irresistible beat.

Once more, while they were dancing, Tony thought he saw Victoria and the French guy make eye contact. But he wasn't sure, and he didn't want to ask Victoria about it, either. He knew how angry she could get when she thought she was being falsely accused of something.

It was only later, when they were getting something to drink, cooling off from all the heat they'd generated on the dance floor, that he actually said something. Jacques was over at the other end of the punch table, sipping on a drink, and Tony distinctly saw Victoria stick her tongue out at him.

"Hey!" he said, taking her by the elbow and turning her to face him. "What's going on? What's with you and this guy Jacques?"

"What?" Victoria said, looking surprised. "What are you talking about, Tony? There's nothing between me and Jacques—or anybody else, except you."

"Yeah? Then how come I saw you sticking your tongue out at him?" Tony asked hotly, putting down his glass of punch and crossing his arms on his chest.

"Oh, that." Victoria giggled, and suddenly Tony

felt unsure again. "He's just so stuck up, I couldn't resist teasing him. It was nothing, totally nothing, okay? So don't get all hot and bothered."

Tony didn't know what to say. Maybe he had gotten all upset over nothing. For the rest of the evening, he didn't catch her doing anything else to make him wonder.

But after the dance, when she was kissing him good-night at his door, he felt a sudden wave of anxiety come over him. It wasn't anything she'd said, but somehow Victoria seemed *bored*. Tony pulled back and looked at her intently.

"What is it, Tony?" she asked him. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," he confessed. He wanted to ask her the questions that were really on his mind. Was he already yesterday's news with her? Was she already using him to make her next boyfriend jealous?

But he didn't have the nerve to ask her. "You tell me, Victoria. Is something wrong, or is everything just like it was before?"

"Of course everything's fine, silly," she assured him, touching the tip of his nose with hers and kissing him lightly on the lips. "Come on, now," she whispered. "You forgive me for flirting with Jacques, don't you? I was only trying to upset him because he's so stuck up."

Tony sighed. "Okay, Victoria," he said.

"I didn't know you were the jealous type," she said, pouting like a little girl.

"Well, I guess I am, baby," Tony said. "I guess I am."

"Well, it'll never happen again, I promise," Victoria said, crossing her heart. "Scout's honor. Forgive me?"

Tony smiled, shaking his head in wonder. There was no way he could stay mad at her when she talked to him like that. "Sure I forgive you," he told her. "See you at the big gig, okay? UCLA, here we come!"

"Good-night, Mr. Fantastic," she said. "See you then."

But this time, when she kissed him good-night, the world did not fade away like it always had before. This time the worries were right there in the front of his mind—in living color.

Was Tony's dream romance about to come crashing down to earth?

Chapter 12

The gig at UCLA was only two days away, and the band had hardly had time to practice, what with Tiffani being so busy with her job as Dr. Heart and Tony always being off somewhere with Victoria. Sly was practically tearing his hair out about it, Matt thought to himself with a chuckle, as he sat at his desk in his eighth-period algebra class.

But Matt was sure the gig was going to go well. He'd written seven new songs for the band, and those, along with "Part of My Heart" and five more of their hottest numbers, would make up a really fantastic couple of sets.

Yes, Matt thought as the bell rang and he gathered up his books. It was going to be the greatest gig they'd ever had—except for one thing. Randi Jo might not even *be* there!

He still hadn't gotten up the nerve to talk with her about his letter in *The Clarion*. After all, he told himself, if she'd read it and recognized him as the writer, why hadn't she said something to him?

Maybe she'd hated the letter. Or worse, maybe she hadn't even realized he'd written it! He had to know.

Going out into the hallway, he went up the nearest stairs to the paper's office. Randi Jo was there, at her computer, laying out the next edition of the paper.

"Hi," he said as he came in. "Are you busy?"

"Kind of," she said apologetically. "Is it really important?"

"Kind of." He waited to see how she would react.

After a moment's hesitation, she turned and clicked the mouse on the computer to save her file. Then she got up and said, "We can talk in here." She led him into a small room off the main office, and they perched next to each other on the end of a desk.

"What's up, Matt?" she asked. "I haven't seen you in a while. Have you been busy?"

"Sort of," he said. "I've been writing a lot of music."

"Oh. That's good. Isn't it? I mean, you look kind of down. Is anything the matter?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "Randi Jo, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Yes, Matt?" She was staring at him with those

big blue eyes of hers. Just looking at her made him feel weak inside.

"Um, did you read that letter in *The Clarion* the other week? In the 'Lovelorn' column?"

"Which one?" Randi Jo asked.

Why was she putting him through this? he wondered. Didn't she know what he was trying to say?

"The one I wrote," he finally said. "About you and me—about us."

"Oh. That one." Randi Jo took a deep breath. "Matt, it was a beautiful letter. I wanted to tell you that right away, but I was afraid you'd take it the wrong way."

"The wrong way?" Matt repeated. He swallowed hard. What was she trying to tell him? Was she going to tell him she didn't even want to be friends anymore? That his feelings for her were making her too uncomfortable?

"Yes. The wrong way. See, Matt, I knew it was you who'd written it, and I was really touched by it, too. But I don't want to rush back into a romance with you. Not yet, anyway."

"Not yet?" Matt echoed. "Does that mean that someday—?"

"Maybe," Randi Jo said, her eyes full of compassion and warmth. "I like you a lot, Matt, you know that. But I'm happy just being friends for now. As for the future, well, can we just leave the door open and see what happens? I mean, you never know."

Matt swallowed hard as he caught her warm smile. "Sure thing, Randi Jo," he said, nodding and giving her a relieved smile. "As long as the door's still open."

"Oh, definitely," she assured him. "Like I said, I just don't want to rush back into something. We already made that mistake once before."

"I know," he said. "And I've learned a lot since then, Randi Jo, believe me."

"I know," she agreed. "I could tell from your letter."

"And you know what?" Matt said. "I've been writing songs about it. In fact, we've got a big gig at UCLA Saturday night. Would you like to come? As a friend, of course."

"As a friend? I'd love to come," she said, giving him a brilliant smile. "Thanks, Matt. I really appreciate how understanding you're being. You're a great guy."

"Just remember that," he told her with a wink.

"You remember it, too," she said, touching his arm lightly, giving him goosebumps. "Well, I'd better get back to work."

"Right," he said, following her back into the main office. "See you the day after tomorrow, then?"

"Don't worry," she promised. "I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

Matt floated out of the *Clarion* office and down the hallway, feeling better than he had in weeks. No

matter what happened between him and Randi Jo, whether they got back together again or stayed just friends—everything was going to be just fine.

• • •

The gymnasium at UCLA was filling up with people as the hour for the big fraternity dance arrived. Tony scanned the backstage area, then the doors of the gym, and checked his watch for the fiftieth time. Where was she? Victoria had told him she'd be here without fail! She knew how important this gig was to him, too.

"Nervous, Tony?" Tiffani asked as she tuned up her bass guitar behind him.

"A little, I guess," he confessed.

"It's okay," Jenny chimed in. "Don't worry—we're going to be a smash. Just wait till these people hear 'Part of My Heart.' They'll go nuts!"

"It's not that," Tony told the girls. "I mean, that's not what's bugging me."

"What is it then, Tony?" Matt asked. Then he turned toward the side of the stage and waved. "Randi Jo! Hi! Over here!" Putting down his guitar, Matt ran over to greet her.

"Victoria is over a half hour late," Tony mumbled.

"Maybe she had trouble parking," Tiffani suggested hopefully. "It's pretty much a mob scene around here."

"That's true," Tony admitted.

"Hey, Sly isn't here yet, either," Jenny pointed out.

"That doesn't bother me," Tony said with a grin. "He's probably out chasing after some college babe. You know Sly. He doesn't miss an opportunity."

Just as Tony said the words, in walked Sly, with a beautiful, dazzling girl on his arm. Her soft red dress brought out the rich hue of her milk chocolate skin, her black hair was piled on her head and set off with rhinestones, and her dark eyes were shining radiantly.

"Jasmine!" Tony gasped, recognizing her. "Wow, she looks fantastic!"

"She sure does," Jenny agreed. "That dress is totally outrageous. I wonder where she got it."

"Hello, everyone," Sly greeted them as he and Jasmine approached the band platform. "Are we ready to slay this crowd?"

"Jasmine," Tony said haltingly, searching for the right words. "Hi . . ."

"Hi, Tony," Jasmine replied with a smile. "Sly invited me to come down and see you play. I hope that's all right with you."

"Uh, sure!" Tony was intensely glad Jasmine was here. He felt bad that he hadn't invited her himself, in fact. But how could he have, what with Victoria coming? Speaking of which, where was she?

"Good luck, everybody," Jasmine told them all. "I'll be out there rooting for you."

"Thanks!" Tiffani and Jenny said. Sly led Jasmine off onto the dance floor, where they greeted Matt and Randi Jo. Tony turned his attention back to the gymnasium doors, where people were still flooding in.

"We start in ten minutes," Jenny said. "Tony, aren't you going to check your drums?"

"Uh, yeah, in a minute," Tony answered.

Just then he saw her walk through the doorway. Victoria looked fantastic, as usual. She was wearing a skintight turquoise dress that made Tony's breath catch in his throat.

But—wait. Victoria was not alone! With her were a few of her friends from the academy. Tony recognized Mitsuko, Edward, Armand—and there was that French guy, Jacques! What was he doing here? Tony wondered. Hadn't Victoria said he was too stuck up for her?

Tony watched as Victoria led her little group up to the band platform. "Hi, handsome," she said to Tony as she put her arms around his waist and hugged him. "I can't wait to dance to your music! When do you guys start?"

"In ten minutes," Tony told her.

"Great! Well, we'll be out there partying," Victoria said, giving his hand a squeeze. "Be great!"

She turned and led her group out onto the dance floor. As she went, Tony saw her take Jacques's hand! He couldn't believe his eyes—but then she leaned over and whispered something in the French guy's

ear. He laughed, and she giggled back. Tony felt his legs go weak underneath him.

Victoria was definitely flirting with that guy! There was no doubt about it. She must have known Tony was watching, too. That meant she had to be doing it just to make him jealous!

His blood boiling in his veins, Tony threw down his drumsticks and jumped off the band platform. "Victoria!" he called, striding over to her, "I need to talk to you. Now. Alone."

Victoria glanced at Jacques and the others, and gave them a shrug and a look that said, "Beats me." She followed Tony to a corner of the gym, where he turned to face her.

"Look, I saw that," he said. "Just what did you think you were doing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Tony," Victoria protested.

"Flirting with that new guy, Jacques. Holding his hand and all. I saw you. In fact, you knew I was watching."

"Jacques is just a friend, that's all."

"That's not what it looked like," Tony insisted. "In fact, that's not what it was, so don't lie to me. What's he doing here, anyway?"

"I invited him, okay?" Victoria shot back. "I needed somebody to dance with, didn't I? Or did you expect me to just stand around and listen to the music while everybody else danced?"

"Matt invited Randi Jo," Tony pointed out. "And she didn't bring anybody to dance with."

"Well, that's fine for her, but I'm not going to stand around like some wallflower." Victoria's eyes were flashing fire now, and there was a distinct flush on her cheeks.

"You invited him here to make me jealous, didn't you?" Tony accused. "You were flirting with him the other night at the party, too, and you knew I was upset about it."

"Hey, if you want to be upset, that's your privilege," Victoria retorted, holding her ground. "But don't expect me to let it ruin my good time."

"That's it!" Tony exploded. "I've been blind, but I can see now what you're up to."

"Oh, really? And what is that?"

"You don't really care about me or my feelings," Tony told her. "If you did, you'd never even think of flirting with somebody else in front of me. You just like it when guys get jealous over you. That's why you paraded me in front of all your old boyfriends, isn't it?"

"Get real, Tony," Victoria said, smirking. "I never paraded you anywhere. And even if I did, so what? What's wrong with showing off your date? I'm allowed to have a little fun, aren't I?"

"I was serious about you, Victoria," Tony said, feeling a lump hardening in his throat. "I almost got that tattoo you wanted me to get—I remember you

saying, 'Aren't we going to be together forever?' Were you just having fun then, too?"

Victoria shrugged. "Oh, that. Well, I notice you didn't get the tattoo. So don't tell me you were so serious about me. Let's face it. We were both just having a good time with each other."

Tony shook his head in disbelief. He'd never seen Victoria this way.

"Sly was right about you," he said. "You've just been playing a little game with me all this time. I was blinded by your looks and your money and your style. But no more. I feel sorry for you now, Victoria. And that's the truth."

"*You* feel sorry for *me*?" she repeated, incredulous. "I totally don't believe this! How dare you?"

"I mean it," Tony insisted. "You probably loved somebody once yourself. And that person probably hurt you—so you've been hurting people ever since, just to get even."

Tony had just been guessing, but he couldn't have imagined the reaction his guess would get. Victoria's jaw dropped, and her eyes filled with bitter tears. "I don't care if I never see you again as long as I live!" she whispered hoarsely. "You're a rude, insensitive dweeb!"

Turning on her heels, she stormed away from him and over to her friends. Slipping her arm through Jacques's, she led him and her other friends straight out of the gym. "Let's go party at the Coast Club

instead of this grungy dive," Tony heard her say as they went.

The last sight he had of her was her flaming red hair, flowing behind her as she stormed out the door and out of his life forever.

Tony stood there paralyzed for a long moment, lost in thought—and overwhelmed by the rush of his feelings. So it had all been an illusion, he realized, from the very beginning. None of it had been real. None of it.

A real relationship was based on honesty and trust. He knew that now. It wasn't just being dazzled by someone's looks or money or sophistication. It was caring for one another that counted. It was friendship that really mattered—the kind he'd had with Jasmine.

Jasmine . . . there she was now, with Sly's arm around her shoulder, looking so beautiful it made his chest ache. Not caring that she was here with Sly, he went over to her and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Jasmine," he said as she turned to face him. "I'm sorry for the way I've treated you. I've been a total jerk. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I just want you to know, I've broken up with Victoria. You were right about her, Sylvester," he acknowledged, turning to Sly. "Well, have fun, you two. Sorry to interrupt you."

"Wait!" Sly said, taking his arm from Jasmine's

shoulder. "Hey, amigo, don't get the wrong impression." With a twinkle in his eye, Sly confessed, "Actually, I asked Jasmine to come here with me tonight just to help you come to your senses."

"Huh?" Tony didn't understand. What was Sly talking about?

"Sly told me to show up looking my very best," Jasmine said with a shy grin. "He said you needed a reminder of all the good things you were missing."

"You mean, you two aren't here on a date?" Tony asked.

"You got the picture, buddy," Sly said, nodding. "Ahem. I guess you two have some catching up to do, so I'll leave you to it. But don't take long, okay? We start our first set in about two minutes."

"This won't take long," Tony assured him as Sly backed away. "Jasmine, can you ever forgive me?"

"Sure I can, Tony," she said, gazing into his eyes. "I care about you. I always have."

"Oh, baby," Tony said, feeling his heart leaping. "If you care about me, prove it. Let's go out tomorrow night, okay?"

"You've got yourself a date, Tony," Jasmine said, her face lighting up with a smile.

Tony leaned in toward her, and they kissed, a long, slow, sweet kiss.

"Whoo-hoo!" The cheer came from behind them. Turning, Tony saw the members of California Dreams applauding and cheering.

"About time you came to your senses, Wicks," Sly said, slapping him on the back.

"Come on, you guys!" Matt said, beckoning them onto the platform. "It's time to get it on! Let's rock and roll!"

Tony leaped up behind the drums and twirled the sticks in his hands. "This one's for you, Jasmine baby!" he said, launching into the opening number with everything in him. "And not just with 'Part of My Heart,' with *all* of it!"

Beauty and the Blues

Romance has abandoned Pacific Coast High! First of all, Tony thinks he's met the woman of his dreams. She drives a Porsche, carries a platinum credit card, and has the body of a supermodel. But what starts off as great chemistry between a rock 'n' roller and a prep-ster soon turns into a full-scale atomic blast! Is she really from his dreams, or are they his nightmares?

Meanwhile, Tiffani's become Dr. Heart, Adviser to the Lovelorn, for the school paper. But instead of bringing people together, her advice keeps tearing them apart!

Have romance and love gone for good? Will Saturday night's rock-out turn into a blues festival? Find out when you read *Beauty and the Blues*, the new novel about California Dreams—the hottest band around!

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